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Robert Page
Editor

Lucy Wagner
Editor

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AUSTRALIAN PLAYWRIGHTS' ISSUE

The top 30 Playwrights
The politics of writing
A new era
The Sydney Theatre Company
in association with
The MLC Theatre Royal Company
presents

CHICAGO
A Musical Vaudeville

BOOK BY
FRED EBB & BOB FOSSE

MUSIC BY
JOHN FRED
KANDER EBB

LYRICS BY

based on the play 'Chicago'
by Maurine Dallas Watkins

starring
NANCYE HAYES
GERALDINE TURNER
TERRY DONOVAN

with
JUDI CONNELLI
GEORGE SPARTELS
J.P. WEBSTER

DIRECTED BY
RICHARD WHERRETT

MUSICAL DIRECTOR CHOREOGRAPHY
PETER ROSS
CASEY COLEMAN

SETTINGS BY
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a play by DOREEN CLARKE

director FAY MOKOTOW
designer FIONA REILLY
SALLY COOPER
MARTIN HARRIS
HEATHER MITCHELL
CAROLE SKINNER

downstairs nimrod
The Playwrights' Conference

The ninth Australian National Playwrights' Conference began its annual two-week meet on April 26. Held now for six consecutive years at Canberra's ANU (and this being the second it has made use of the excellent facilities of the new Arts Centre) the Conference has become something of an institution in that city as well as on the national theatrical map.

The ANPC was conceived in 1972 by a small band of people convinced that to flourish, budding Australian playwrights needed a testing ground for new work, an introduction to the theatrical process and a time and place to meet. Such people as Katharine Brisbane, Philip Parsons, Jacqueline Kott, Amy McGrath, Brian Syron and Dorothy Hewett constituted the inaugural committee and the first Conference was held in Canberra in 1973, in conditions of comparative luxury — the budget was $20,000. It was based very much on the American O'Neill Centre's Playwrights' Conference and has since developed in ways more suited to this country in theatrical, geographic and other terms.

In spite of the success of the first conference, finance with which to run subsequent ones became increasingly hard to find over the next few years. The munificent Whitlam era finished and the struggling ANPC seemed to many funding bodies a suitable lame dog to strike from the subsidy lists. The 1978 Playwrights' Conference was threatened with complete extinction, but managed to reverse the Theatre Board decision of no funding and became a turning point in the development of the organisation. Bob Adams and Brian Sweeney of the Theatre Board spent some time in Canberra, participated in the activities and debate and saw for themselves the enormous value of the developing Theatre Forum element and the support of the attending professionals for the workshop and discussion processes.

From that time the Playwrights' Conference has gone from strength to strength and this year's is one of expanded activity. Artistic Director, Graeme Blundell, and Chairman of the Playreading Committee, Ron Blair, have chosen seven plays to be given full workshop treatment and a further ten to have rehearsed readings.

Of the workshop plays, live of the seven are by known writers: Alma de Groen (Vocations), Richard Fotheringham (Hell and Hay), Clem Gorman (A Night In The Arms of Raeleen), Bob Herbert (Sex and Violets) and Dorothy Hewett (Zimmer); and only two by new writers: The Butterflies of Kalamantan by Kate Bowland and Death of Willy by Frank McKone.

This weighting looks like a major change in direction for a conference that was established primarily to foster new playwrights. It can be seen, though, as a circular movement and one that is in some ways overdue. Many writers who were "new" some nine years ago have since become "established", in varying degrees, but still find difficulties in finding outlets for their work, particularly that which takes a new direction or could be regarded as "experimental". With the development of dramatists over the last decade the aims of the ANPC can be seen to have matured from strength to strength but still find difficulties in finding outlets for acknowledged writers. It could also be argued that of the two or so new writers whose scripts have been worked at each previous Conference, rarely have more than two in any one year gone on to further significant work. (Blundell and Blair have this year chosen what they believe to be the "best" of the submitted scripts, rather than those "most suitable for workshop" — the criterion of former years.)

On the other hand, the untried playwrights who had submitted scripts to the ANPC may feel that established writers are unfairly encroaching on their very limited territory; that the known names will at least get a hearing from theatre companies while the Playwrights Conference represents to them almost the only chance to see their work in performance, to make contact with the theatre world or to be in any way acknowledged. However unintentional, the showcase aspect of final readings in Canberra, to audiences of directors, agents and entrepreneurs, is highly desirable for a playwright at whatever stage of her career.

Perhaps in an effort to redress the balance against established writers, this year's ANPC has swung too far in their favour. In the future it may be necessary to allocate a certain proportion of slots to new and a certain proportion to known writers. A straightforward choice of the Continued on Page 64
HAPPY TENTH TO CURRENCY

It was hard to work out who wasn't there to say "Happy 10th Birthday" to Currency Press Publishers on 31 March. A huge crowd of writers, directors, actors, critics and funders guzzled happily while a tearful Philip Parsons explained how he and fellow-editor Katharine Brisbane had fought against cynicism and financial odds to convince Australians that they could read performable plays.

Barry Humphries in his newly-defined role as Australian dramatist, officially launched Currency's latest chef d'oeuvre — Peter Holloway's edition of *Contemporary Australian Drama, Perspectives since 1955* and reminisced. Just as the University Co-Op Bookshop's impressive Bay Street store where the launching was held had once been Grace Bros sock department, so the Australian Theatre had changed from the days when he was a young lad in the Union Rep. And a good thing too, everybody seemed to say.

Helen Musa

GORDON CHATER RETURNS

Gordon Chater will be returning to our stages in a joint (Helen Montagu, Wilton Morley, MLC Theatre Royal, Paul Dainty and AETT!) commercial production of Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser* — the play which won last year's Evening Standard Drama Critics Award for Best Play. The production will star Warren Mitchell as the dresser, Gordon Chater as Sir, the actor and Ruth Cracknell as Her Ladyship. Director will be Rodney Fisher and the play will open at the Theatre Royal, Sydney on May 22.

*The Dresser* was inspired by the life and times of the late actor/manager Sir Donald Wolfit and his Shakespearean company which toured the English repertory theatre circuit during World War Two. Playwright Harwood was Wolfit's dresser for almost five years and he has also written the actor's biography.

In the June 1980 issue of *TA*, Irving Wardle said of the play: "Among other things *The Dresser* is just the kind of melodramatic suspense story in which the old actors excelled. It also accommodates quantities of backstage lore, superstition, actors' jokes ("What — fifty of my followers with the clap!?"), and the routine tensions of getting a show on.")

After a six week Sydney season *The

Dresser will go on to the Comedy Theatre, Melbourne on July 7.

It will certainly be a pleasure to see Mr Chater back in Australia, and hopefully this production will have the sort of success that might persuade him to stay.

Gordon Chater

NO MORE FOR OPERA

The Commonwealth Government has now definitely stated that it will not be providing any additional funds for the opera companies, as was proposed in the Opera and Music Theatre in Australia Report (commissioned by the Australia Council). It will maintain its funding of the Australian Opera, though, as a single line item of expenditure in the Federal Budget. It will also continue to support the orchestras in the hands of the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, rather than allying them to the Opera and Ballet, as the Report proposed.

Australia Council Chairman, professor Geoffrey Blainey was disappointed in the Federal Government's decision, but said the Report was still valuable as a reference and guide book. Unfortunately not one that the Government saw fit to be guided by.

"The Victoria State Opera is making clear its independence from the Australian Opera in any case. The two companies'
combined marketing of opera seasons will not continue beyond the current 1981 season. VSO Chairman, Jeffrey Sher QC, said "The Victoria State Opera believes its future lies in developing its independent character and status and in providing opportunity for employment to Victorians in a musical vocation."

"The Victoria State Opera Board recognizes the need to provide alternative and more diverse forms of music theatre including opera, musical comedy and Australian opera in the new Victorian Arts Centre, the Myer Music Bowl and in Victorian country areas."

The VSO is already operating a special discount scheme to assist secondary students during the Company's 1981 season.

JUDY DAVIS FOR LULU

It certainly won't have done any harm to the State Theatre Company of SA's production of Lulu that Judy Davis won two BAFTA Awards for Best Actress and Best Newcomer, though Jim Sharman had picked her as his lead long before she had even been nominated. The production will be touring to the Sydney Theatre Company after its Adelaide season and will be at the Drama Theatre from July 21.

Louis Nowra has written the adaptation of Lulu by Frank Wedekind; the play is made up of two parts, Earth Spirit and Pandora's Box, subtitled "Scenes of Sex, Murder and Power."

Judy Davis

Apart from Judy, it will be a star studded production, with Kerry Walker, Brandon Burke, Ivar Kants, Malcolm Robertson and Ralph Cottrell in the cast.

Sharman has once again put together the designing team that has been so successful in the past — notably with his Death in Venice at the last Adelaide Festival — of Brian Thomson, designing the sets, and Luciana Arrighi on costumes.

Lulu is a play that has shocked audiences since its first performance in 1898. One of the most remarkable creations in dramatic literature, Lulu ("a beautiful and genuine female animal") is a woman whose sexual drives destroy the males she comes into contact with and in the end result in her own destruction.

MTC FEEDBACK

In the March edition of Theatre Australia, Page 3 "Comment", you make a statement about the MTC which is erroneous or rather the implication gives, I feel, the wrong impression. You talk about financial tightropes and then you mention that the MTC had an injection of over $1 million from the Victorian Government in 1977.

The fact is that we persuaded the Victorian Government to give us $1 million to buy a building. That was the beginning and end of the matter. We weren't on any financial tightrope at the time and we could have continued in the old premises, but we took the opportunity to better ourselves by persuading the Government to do something for us as a prelude to the Arts Centre.

I do think you ought to have this information because, in fact, some people have said to us, as a result of your article, that they heard that the Government had to bail us out of financial difficulties to the tune of $1 million. That is absolutely untrue.

John Sumner, Director, Melbourne Theatre Company

MANIPULATING REALITY

"Manipulating Reality: The Mask and Puppet as Theatre" (National Gallery of Victoria, March 5-April 19) was an exhibition organised by the Performing Arts Museum of Victoria in conjunction with the Education Services section of the Gallery. The Exhibition Co-ordinator, Anita Sinclair, had the daunting task of collecting the excess of 250 masks and puppets. These were supplemented by items from the Gallery's collection to make a total of 100 masks and nearly 200 puppets.

The exhibition encompassed an extraordinary diversity of cultures, materials, styles and uses of puppets and masks, giving a whistle-stop history of the art in Europe and Asia and an historical perspective on puppetry in Australia from Peter Scriver and the Rayner sisters to the contemporary, adults only puppets of Captain Lazar and Momma's Little Horror Show.

The exhibition highlighted the curatorial problems of conserving and displaying objects which exist in a dynamic relationship between their users and their audience. Understandably the Gallery curators were concerned for the security of the items and equally understandably the 80 contributing mask and puppet creators were concerned that their creations lived in their space.

For Anita Sinclair masks the puppets are "lurking spirits, containing within them the threat that they might at any minute move", and it was with that intention that she created an environment like an attic overcrowded with favourite toys, an ancestor house of every child's and adult's dreams.

Although workshops and demonstrations were run in conjunction with the exhibition, it was clear that there had been a budget commensurate with the scope of the undertaking, more time to prepare it and more space in which to stage it, it could have been even more popular and instructive than it was. Nevertheless, it drew more than 3,500 people in its first week.

Suzanne Spunner

BEECHAM AT THE ATHENAEUM

The Melbourne Theatre Company is currently presenting the Australian Premiere of Beecham, a play about the flamboyant and outrageous English conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham, at its Athenaeum 2 Theatre.

Beecham's director, Ron Rodger, said: "Sir Thomas Beecham — Baronet and Companion of Honour — is synonymous with the development of music appreciation in Britain. The champion of Mozart
and Delius, in particular, it was Sir Thomas Beecham who first brought Diaghilev and the Russian Ballet to premiere seasons at Covent Garden.

"During his lifetime he formed four major symphonic orchestras and was guest conductor with many of the great orchestras of Europe and America. He recorded onto disc innumerable operas, symphonies and concertos and was one of the earliest conductors to have his works recorded onto magnetic tape and to use stereophonic recording methods.

David Atkins has been cast in the starring role.

YOUNG ACTORS TO STAR IN NEW MOVIES

Simpson Le Mesurier Films have announced their lead for the role of the infamous Squizzy Taylor, the notorious Australian underworld character of the '30s about whom they are making the film, Squizzy. David Atkins has been cast in the starring role.

STUDIOS SYDNEY

The Studio Sydney Theatre Company will open its season at the Wayside Theatre in May with a Tennessee Williams double bill in honour of the American playwright's 70th birthday this year. SS's Artistic Director Leila Blake will play lead roles in both plays — The Lady of Larkspur Lotion and Suddenly Last Summer.

ST MARTINS — PROJECTING THE NEW IMAGE

St Martins' Youth Arts Centre opens this year with a season of exciting premieres of theatre pieces by young people. The shows will be staged at the new theatre complex which incorporates three fully equipped venues designed specifically for the promotion and development of work by young members.

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WHISPERS RUMOURS & FACTS

by Norman Kessell

If even half of the current rumours are true, Australia — or at least Melbourne and Sydney — will see a spate of revived musicals such as London and New York are now experiencing.

These really are rumours and should be treated as such, but among the titles now being bandied about are My Fair Lady, The Sound Of Music, Oliver, Oklahoma! and The Rocky Horror Show.

Conversely, I hear that White Horse Inn, long touted by Noel ("Let's Hear It For The Musical") Ferrier and at one stage firmly scheduled by the Elizabethan Theatre Trust as a Christmas 1981 holiday season attraction at Sydney's Regent Theatre, is once again a non-starter. Trust spokespersons are not yet speaking, but the Trust is still holding that Regent date, so a replacement for the Inn could be any of the above in which it might have an interest. Or perhaps a surprise?

Spicy additions to the rumours link Julie Anthony with My Fair Lady; John English, Nancye Hayes and, as Fagin, Gary (Gunston) McDonald with Oliver; entrepreneur Wilton Morley with the Rocky Horror Show, tipped as an end-of-year attraction at Sydney's Theatre Royal. (The Riverina Trucking Company is presenting its own revival of The Rocky Horror Show in Wagga from July 17 to August 1.)

The "glorious uncertainty" of showbiz could not be better exemplified than by the success of Sydney's Marian Street Theatre production of Dave Freeman's A Bedfull Of Foreigners. Accorded not much more than polite acceptance by the critics and seen as a rather ill-timed choice by a theatre under threat of losing its subsidy because of "declining standards", it turned out to be that venue's most profitable show in more than two years. It plays to an average 80 percent capacity and grossed more than $100,000 at the box office. Director Peter Williams is now negotiating to take it on tour in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

And let's not forget this comedy was programmed and its director engaged by former artistic director Alastair Duncan long before he was sacked by the Marian Street board of directors. (The less said about the so-called comedy that followed, Richard Harris' Outside Edge, the better.)

And while we're on the success trip, a "well done" to all concerned with the Sydney Theatre Co's production of Dorothy Hewett's The Man, From Mukimipin, which broke the box office record for a play at the Opera House Drama Theatre, with 45 performances to a more than 90 percent capacity. Unfortunately the MTC's production didn't do so well.

Anent that projected tour for A Bedfull of Foreigners, Peter Williams is experiencing a difficulty now besetting commercial managements generally — the unavailability of theatres. He tells me he simply cannot get dates for the London success Filmalena, even with Diane Cilento starring. He does not expect either her or the rights to remain much longer available.

"It'll probably then be done either by the subsidised Melbourne or Sydney Theatre Company and if successful transfer into a commercial house," he said, rather angrily. "And on much more favourable terms than would be available to an operation like mine.

"It's an easy cop for a commercial theatre landlord to trade on the previous success of a show at a subsidised theatre.

"Another thing is that actors demand much higher pay from a commercial management than from a subsidised company, which may be very natural and altruistic, but it doesn't help the business. I feel the whole scene needs a thorough shake-up."

Meanwhile, Williams, in association with Gary Penny and former Film Australia production head Tim Read, is preparing for his first venture into TV production. Script and pre-production details are in hand for a family drama series with a circus setting. To be made in conjunction with Ashton's Circus, and tentatively titled Puckett's Circus, shooting of the pilot is expected to begin next spring.

And in his spare time, Peter is working on his next school holiday production, Dick Whittington, to play the Phillip Street Theatre from May 9 to 23.

In the February issue of TA I questioned the Theatre Board's use of "faceless men" as assessors of production and performance standards of the 18 theatre companies it is responsible for subsidising. I have since been officially assured that all the board's assessors are people well versed in the performing arts. Moreover, they are free, if they so wish, to identify themselves when attending a performance. Also that final assessments are a consensus expertly compiled from all assessor's reports; that the Theatre Board then merely makes a recommendation about future subsidisa-
In his studio in a City Road building adjoining the massive spread of the now recognizable Victorian Arts Centre fronting on to St Kilda Road, John Truscott perches on his stool and surveys the clutter of his work table. He is surrounded by inks, paints, brushes, swatches of fabric and leather and samples of metal. He holds a square of glass up to the light as he talks to the people who stand beside him. "Get some sandblasted glass from New Zealand," he says. A voice murmurs, "Someone said something about Muldura glass" and another chimes in that "Some restaurants use it to get that turn of the century look". The discussion is terminated when a set of blueprints is thrust into his hand and the others melt away.

It can't be easy being the centre of so much turmoil while engaged in the mammoth task of putting into effect the interior design of the entire Victorian Arts Centre. His appointment as designer of the project was an inspired choice by the committee headed by George Fairfax. Truscott is a designer who combines a brilliantly imaginative flair with the discipline of good taste. The Centre could not be in safer hands.

Truscott returned to Australia after
many years overseas to design the Victorian State Opera’s production of Idomeneo in 1978. The man who had won laurels for both the stage play and the film of the musical, Camelot, winning the design Oscar for the film, and with many other triumphs to his credit, was so successful with the small budget Idomeneo, that the Australian Opera bought his designs for the opera, producing it with Joan Sutherland singing Ilia. He returned the following year to design an exquisite production of The Pearl Fishers for the VSO and again the Australian Opera was so impressed that the VSO took it to Sydney and this time it was their production that was seen at the Opera House.

Certainly there couldn’t be a much bigger job than this one that involves amongst other areas, a cast circular Concert Hall with theatrical museum included, a three theatre complex, restaurants, bars, back stage facilities including green rooms, dressing rooms, rehearsal rooms and so on. It’s a mammoth task because amid all the more glamorous and obvious facets of the design, every detail down to each power point and electric light switch has to be included.

Beginning such an undertaking means that you have to have a sense of direction. One of the important factors is that much of the Arts Centre is subterranean; the creation of a light and almost other world atmosphere has become central to Truscott’s thinking. “The auditorium of the circular Concert Hall was just poured cement when I first saw it. So I had to decide what to do with this fairly icy, impersonal and gloomy interior. I had the idea of using the colours of Australian quartz crystals, our semi-precious stones. This brought about a further idea of using situations and colourations as you see them when looking through split rock.” “Like a seam of opal?” “Yes! Just like that.”

“The colours of these semi-precious stones are marvellously rich. Some of these colours will be painted on cement with dyes so that the texture of the cement comes through; the effect of cut rock but cloudier. Some walls and ceilings when painted will be overlaid with projections of the same colourations to give a three-dimensional quality.”

He explains that the foyer walls will be padded with golden, antique leather which is not a bright gold but a dull, soft colour. Banding this, horizontally, there will be three rows of brass, brass at the skirting boards, at ceiling level and at the wall joints too. The ceiling itself will be Dutch leaf that gives a burnished antique look on gold. The carpet colour is one of the jewel colours, that of rhodonite, a deep red that shades almost to garnet. This building is on five levels and it is the street level that is the highest. The floor at street level is of travatine marble in the same rhodonite colour but as the levels descend carpet is used in rhodonite tones that get darker as they descend. On these levels the marble is used only round the bars and elevators.

“The walls along the stairwells are broken with areas of bevelled mirrors. All the wall perimeters in the theatre areas have wide troughs embedded in the floor and they are light sources, lighting the walls from the floor. Also the bush-hammered columns have bases with similar light sources, to give a sense of lightness to this largely subterranean building.”

All the time he is talking, John wanders around, finding samples of leather, of carpet colours, pieces of chrystal, metal or glass and showing them to me to illustrate his ideas.

“It’s difficult to explain what I mean. For instance, interspersed throughout the building are light walls - artist created panels, back lit to give a chrystalline effect in jewel colours. These are to break up the leather walls. There will be decorative art works of chrome, plexiglass and brass, very prismatic in form. So they are not only decorative hangings but a surface to bounce light from. Suspended from one storey above St Kilda Road level and going down the full five storeys in a void area is a laser beam sculpture which is a by-product of laser beams.” The colours created by laser beams and the shapes are dazzling and a sculpture of this kind promises to be magnificent.

The seating colours will be different in each auditorium, using the quartz chrystal colours once again. “Seats will be covered in wool fabrics, textures and colours to harmonize with the walls. There will be blocks of seats in each theatre of different shades, very muted in colour, each block softly merging into the next colour block. The fabric is very tweedy looking. It is a wool bucle really in mixed tones.”

“All very fine,” I say, “but what about the seats themselves? Will they be more comfortable than those dreadfully hard ones in the Sydney Opera House?” “They certainly will. A
tremendous lot of time and effort has been put into the choice of seats and they are marvellously comfortable, the ones that have been chosen.”

Not from any point of view, has John Truscott got an easy job. He has to deal with huge quantities of materials and the assessment of amounts required is a big responsibility. He is also under pressure in terms of time. The Concert Hall is supposed to be finished by the end of this year, subject to strikes which have been almost constant since work on the project began.

While the public think of the Concert Hall as an auditorium, the back stage areas are very large and varied and even here the semi-precious stone theme has been carried through. “The Green Room will be very green because it is based on chrysophase. Superb with the light through it. The conductors’ room is tortoiseshell and copper. I’ve used lots of sand colours back stage to lighten these areas and make them liveable and pleasant. As much attention has been given to the back as the front of the house. This will be a great attraction to visiting artists.”

Returning to the Concert Hall, Truscott explains that he is using very theatrical lighting for the front of the house. “I’ve tried too, to use as much Australian material as possible in every area of design. I’ve only used imported material where Australian is not available and that’s only in minor instances.” I asked him about the pieces of glass that he was discussing when I came in. “I’m getting some wonderful effects with glass. Dyes swirled around glass give the effect of marble. See this piece here” — and he holds it up to the light - “See how wonderful it looks with the light behind it. Some glass” - he grabs another piece — “like this has a tweed-like texture. That is obtained by pressing a mould into it when the glass is hot.”

“What else can I tell you? There are so many details involved. The wood is Queensland walnut, the theatre colours for the three theatres are based on alloys. The State Theatre on brass, the Playhouse on pewter, the Studio on copper, and the semi-precious stones provide the seat and other colours. I’ve seen and heard the Concert Hall organ in Quebec where it is being built. It’s absolutely superb.”

A rare, almost illegal privilege is given to me and John takes me through to where his models of the Concert Hall and the three theatres are displayed. They are very exciting, as are his sketches and paintings of the main foyer and other interiors. While nothing can or ever will compare with the externals of the Sydney Opera House or its view over the harbour, in terms of sheer magnificence, functional efficiency and comfort, front and back of the house, I believe the Victorian Arts Centre’s interior will far surpass it.

Time will tell and time is what is eating up the funds available for the project. With each successive strike, whether it be over the builders’ loo or a few fleas, time is lost, costs leap up and the opening date of the Concert Hall, now postponed to early 1982, recedes and it is the taxpayer who ultimately foots the bill. Meanwhile, 35 hour weeks make headlines, while John Truscott works a 14 hour day and often an 80 hour week to bring his plans and dreams to fruition.
As the obfuscating fug of subtropical summer lifts from the Brisbane skyline and gives way to the clear-headedness of balmy days and cool nights, it may be appropriate to make a few observations about recent theatrical developments and scan the road ahead.

The three major subsidised companies in the city (one must unfortunately discount the stimulating Brisbane Actors' Company, who mass with frustrating irregularity) appear to have weathered the first fifteen months of the despondent eighties with their pennants fluttering encouragingly in the breeze. TN's The Choir, the QTC's Mourning Becomes Electra and La Boîte's Traitors have been among the most auspicious signs that the forces of austerity and compromise need not win the day.

The TN Company, almost torn apart last year by the reaction to the failure of John Milson's adventurous programming to attract subscribers, went into recess for several months in a 'protect and survive' bid to keep its bank balance in the black and hence merit adequate funding. They have resurfaced with Bryan Nason, a director of flair and guru-like charisma, at the helm and a young but dynamic company assembled for what appears to be a character defining season. Hamlet, a qualified critical success but inevitably popular and publicised with astounding efficiency, saw Nason, a devotee of Shakespeare, using some of the state's most interesting younger actors, among them, Geoff Cartwright and Judith Anderson, backed by supernumeraries culled from the Kelvin Grove C.A.E. theatre diploma course. A 'special relationship' appears to have developed with the college who in turn provide office space and facilities to what has become virtually a nomadic company due to the inordinate expense of using the Twelfth Night Theatre building itself. The tent was set up in the University's Cement Box Theatre for the coup of the season, the second and apparently authorially approved production of The Choir and will move to a city church hall for an improvisatory variation on themes from The Comedy of Errors, dubbed Skitz 'n Frenzy.

So chequered is the TN's history that only foolhardily would one risk prophesying their future; the conditions are certainly there for a renaissance under Nason's command, enthusiasm, vibrancy and a canny sense of where the audiences are to be found. The QTC on the other hand have need to look no further. With 8,000 subscribers (the second longest list in the country) they have commenced both their first productions this year with a virtual sell-out. It would be churlish perhaps to baulk at a state company's using subsidy to mount a commercial hit such as Annie, especially if the Theatre Board makes provision for such a choice if balanced with less frothy fare and if tours of southern produced musicals such as Annie and Evita are determined to give Brisbane a wide berth. However, the hegemony of the subscriber, besides recently being the cause of some stormy reactions to less than ecstatic critical receptions in a number of publications, including TA, which has no effect on how many bums hit the seats, is surely invidious in a subsidised set-up when one is obliged to pay for a lightweight musical simply in order to be sure of a seat for, say Cat on a Hot Tin Roof or The Seagull. Unfortunately, the QTC, forging ahead artistically seem hidebound by an over deterministic attitude to what it sees as a uniquely Brisbane type of audience who know what they like. The unwillingness to take risks, surely anathema to subsidised art, is epitomised by the choice of No Names, No Pack Drill as the one new Australian play of the season, though rumours of a possible 'alternative' season being initiated might scotch one's doubts. The question is, how alternative is 'alternative'?

Ironically, La Boîte, whose recent graduation from recipient of a Project Grant to that of a General Grant must indicate a new maturity in the eyes of the Australia Council, finds itself this year mounting plays such as Wings and Mary Barnes which, elsewhere, have been the diet of the state company. Malcolm Blaylock, La Boîte's artistic director of eighteen months' standing, is concerned that their style of programming. His answer is to push for La Boîte's identity as a community theatre, moving outside the Hale Street building and acting as a catalyst in various areas of the city's life. A show with this sort of potential was Dickinson, which played to unions, political groups etc and was one of the most successful in last year's season of Australian plays, many of them politically orientated. In this main house seasons, Blaylock seems determined to fulfill the theatre's now declared commitment to indiginous writing and is this month, appropriately, repeating its role as host to the Queensland Playwrights Conference.
International Theatre Season

Claire Dan and Anthony Steele discuss the project

with Lucy Wagner

It showed a considerable amount of vision to predict that the Australian tour of *The Liberation of Skopje* would be the success it turned out. It was acclaimed as the high point of both Sydney and Perth Festivals and did excellent business at all its venues — in spite of its subject matter being the effect of World War Two on an obscure Yugoslavian town and performed totally in a Yugoslavian dialect. What is more, over 80% of its audiences were Anglo-Saxon Australians.

The vision behind the Australia season of *Skopje* is that of Claire Dan OBE and the organisation she has brought into existence and called the International Theatre Season.

There has been some confusion between that and the World Theatre Exchange programme, publicised by the Elizabethean Theatre Trust and the Australia Council Theatre Board some eighteen months ago. The projected World Theatre Exchange aimed to import overseas productions in exchange for a tour to that company's venue of an Australian show, thus hoping to set up an international touring circuit. It seemed like a good idea, and knowing Miss Dan's plans, the originators invited her and her Cladan Institute to become the administrative centre for the programme.

The problem, according to the Season's Artistic Advisor, Anthony Steele, AM, was that "It was really just a gleam in (Theatre Board Chairman) Brian Sweeney's eye, but there was no money attached to it. Cladan Institute tried to pick up and help as it seemed to meld in with our International Theatre Season plans, but it never got properly started."

"My lap and I was supposed to provide all the money so I pulled out. To talk about an exchange is asking too much to start with, it's trying to do two things at once. The first step is to get them here and then we think productions will naturally start going the other way."

The Cladan Institute started work on the ITS project some years ago — in fact at the same time as its now extremely successful International Piano Competition, but it seemed a riskier plan than the Competition and needed more research. So, after a false start with the World Theatre Exchange idea, the real International Theatre Season got off to a flying start this year with its first production, *The Liberation of Skopje*.

It wasn't as simple as it looks with hindsight, however. Claire Dan found herself "in disagreement with my friends all over the world who said it would only work with classical theatre. But I wanted modern theatre; Australia is a young country and I wanted to do something that had never been tried before. In my research I discovered that language is not necessarily the prime consideration in good modern theatre, it is so often very visual. *Skopje* proved that. Everyone said I was crazy — even the day before it opened they told me 'Send them back'. No one believed in it, so on the Australian side I financed it all myself. Of course I nearly died of fright, but it worked out alright."

Now ITS has two further productions this year, one from Greece and one from Holland, to run consecutively this month. The ITS seasons will be necessarily spasmodic, depending on the availability of in-coming companies, venues in Australia and of course the finance side. The idea is simply to mount international productions in a totally professional fashion right in the mainstream of Australian theatre-going — "not in a ghetto."

So from April 30 at the Theatre Royal, Sydney, the Greek Amphitheatre Company's production of Menander's *Epitrepontes* (*The Arbitration*) will be playing for ten days and then moving on to the Melbourne Her Majesty's for a further 12 performances. This revival of *The Arbitration* premiered at the Epidaurus Festival last August to great acclaim; Anthony Steele believes it was aimed to a degree at the foreign visitors to the Festival and so can work well here.

Director, Spyros Evangelatos has taken as a starting point the fact that Menander's comedies, although not that great in themselves, had an enormous influence on later comedy writers through the ages. Accordingly he has set each of the five acts in a different period and with a different acting style: Act I starts us off in ancient Greek theatre; II is played as commedia dell'arte; III appears as a Moliere play; Act IV becomes Victor-
ian melodrama; and V moves to the style of Greek cinema in the '50s! The acts are connected by mimed interludes showing the troupe as travelling players — here in tragic rather than comic mode — journeying symbolically through the ages.

Anthony Steele thinks that there will probably be a higher proportion of Greek Australians going to the show than Yugoslavians attending *Skopje*, especially as they've had the luck to catch Greek Week during the Melbourne run. But he hopes it will still have the desired effect of giving Australian audiences and theatre a strong dose of a non Anglo-Saxon influence.

Following that (from May 11) we will have the chance to see *Delusion*, the work of the leading Dutch "alternative" company, De Horde (The Herd). A household name in Europe, Steele feels this show may be harder to sell, particularly to the age group De Horde play to at home, the 18 to 21 year olds.

Their style is individual and perhaps the best description of it is the outdated term "Theatre of the Absurd". De Horde deal in rich theatrical images of an uncertain modern day world and ground their shows in rock music (actors and musicians are interchangeable). A major feature of *Delusion* is an incredible set, built especially for touring with a grant from the Prince Bernhard Foundation. It consists of a street where monorail vehicles appear, the houses are all out of perspective including one interior that makes the actors look gigantic — "a punk version of The Cabinet of Dr Caligari" — various traps, swing doors and dangerous slopes. As one might expect, the actors have split second timing and amazing physical control; and with the great Dutch linguistic ability they are quite able to give the performances in English.

If *The Liberation of Skopje* was an indication, the imagination and foresight of Claire Dan and Anthony Steele should ensure equal success for these two acclaimed productions. Just as *Skopje* showed among other things, the enormous potential for open air theatre in this temperate climate, so these should demonstrate further possibilities for new directions and added dimensions in theatre here.
Approaching a hair pin bend

Every year for the past three I have dutifully clambered up the steps at 325 Drummond Street as the early autumn sun fitfully rises over Lygon Street, cassette recorder in one hand and recent press releases in the other, and asked the infernal question, about directions for the coming year.

To put this question to any other theatre company would be superfluous in the extreme, but around the Pram the answer is of vital importance because past practice is never taken for granted. Moreover in recent years, when it has been under threat from all flanks, the question has been posed in the most fundamental terms — will it survive, if so, how and in what form?

Every year if I have not exactly come away with "the answer", I have at least impaled the key phrases and maintained an up to date lexicon of the shifts in vocabulary around the place. The key phrases for 1979 were, "New Economic Policy", "Semi Autonomous Projects" and "Positive Discrimination in favour of women"; in 1980 the big word was "Ensemble" and all references to director were to be excised henceforth and replaced by "mediator". Phrases from earlier times still rang around the building — "Collective" (as in "Collective meeting", "Collective decision", "Collective hassles" etc etc), "Self-management", "Group-devised" and "Theatre worker" tended to be stayers.

I'm happy to report that this year is no different, except that the words currently in vogue have a familiar ring to them, in fact you could almost say that they have been resurrected or, as it might be said, revalued and reinstated. They are "Director" as in, "outside directors", "new directors", "the need to foster the growth of..."; and "Writer" as in "outside playwrights", "new playwrights", "the need to foster the growth of...".

Thus in the first issue of A PG News incorporating The Perambulator and The A PG Newsletter we find:

The APG this year will help five directors to get their projects off the ground. At a time when arts funding is being severely reduced, the Directors programme is a boldly progressive scheme. The successful applicants are David Kendall, Roger Pulvers, Peter Friedrich, Richard Murphett and Val Kirwan. Although the five proposals are different, they are all concerned with exploiting the possibilities of unusual texts.

The General Manager of the APG, John Timlin described the new policy of allocating a proportion of the budget for outside directors to work at the
Pram as, "the most radical turn around — in the past directors were superfluous, at best". He added that the Ensemble (who are now known as the Core Group) had begun to feel the need to get people in to direct; and it was on this basis that Nick Lathouris came in and directed the Ensemble's most recent show, Kate Lathouris's Travelling Circus. Now it has become a matter of supplementing the greatly depleted Ensemble and ultimately arriving at an ensemble company "in a more organic way". So it was decided to give the directors a chance to open up the place.

Though the Ensemble actually chose the programme, "choosing the directors was choosing the programme because each director's application was on the basis of a particular programme. But," he added, "they have had absolute freedom in casting." The two productions to date, David Kendall's production of The Real Life Of Sebastian Melmoth and Roger Pulvers' production of The Two-Headed Calf have included no APG actors and only one actor who has worked previously in an APG production. Timlin added that as yet a form between the different groups had not developed, but that he had hopes that it would eventuate, and from that rapport and exchange at least the basics of the 1982 programme might emerge.

Jon Hawkes, long time APG member, has only recently returned with Circus Oz and he finds the move toward directors an "interesting" volte face: "I guess I find it ironic that the APG now sees as its saving grace the Directors' Development Fund. It's very funny that a group that has been so anti-director ends up saving itself by employing directors. But on the other hand it's a great idea because it's good to have a group other than the Theatre Board making decisions about which directors are supported, simply because it means you get a different point of view."

The search for new playwrights has been a recurrent enterprise since 1978 when their first major playwriting competition led to the production of Barry Dickins' Foolshoe Hotel and Stephen Sewell's Traitors. The judging of this year's competition has only recently been finalised. In excess of a hundred scripts were received and read by the Core Group — Peter King, Denis Moore, Richard Healey, Danny Nash and Val Lekowitz. According to Timlin there were many Williamson imitators and would-be or actual television writers. He added that the competition obviously does a lot to publicise the fact that the Pram Factory is still in existence.

There have been a number of scripts coming in after the closing date. These are still being read because there is a commitment in the competition to mount productions of two scripts, and as yet only one, Steel City Sister by Joy Wiedersatz, has been definitely programmed. In addition six rehearsed readings of new Australian writing have already been presented on Sunday afternoons, and more are scheduled. The readings have included selections from the current Playwrights' Competition as well as new works by established writers: Jack Hibberd and George Dreyfus' new musical comedy, Smash Hit, which had been commissioned last year through the Music Board of the Australia Council was recently read. These readings have aroused considerable interest and have been attended by between eighty and one hundred people, and as well have provided an invaluable service to the writers themselves.

In addition to producing the two plays chosen from the Playwrights' Competition, the Core Group are in the process of devising a portable music theatre piece and they will be performing later this year in the new play by Tim Robertson based on Sterne's Tristam Shandy.

As John Timlin said this time, and has no doubt said before — "The Pram has a way of coming good every time there's a crisis."

Indeed I imagine in a year's time I'll be back there again and that then the key words may well be "new venue" and "organically created company".
In Murwillumbah, in Murwillumbah,
In Murwillumbah you know exactly
who you are,
And who you mean to be, my dear.
And who you mean to be
In Murwillumbah
Bah...

© Bob Ellis and Mervyn Drake
from A Very Good Year, 1980.

Ellis, walking home in the fragrant dark,
paused in the lamplight beneath the pink
frangipanis on his new front lawn and felt
at peace. Moths danced round his face.
The Hills Hoist clinked in the dark. He
looked up at his big old twenties mansion,
furnished with warthog taste by his
muscular octogenarian parents and de­
decided to loiter outside instead, among
the dining cicadas and the nostalgia.

The Tweed Valley dreamed around him.
None of the houses was any different.
A little way from here Roy Masters, he and
David Ellyard had been schoolboys together.
Three houses down the street, John Hargreaves had grown up, very
quietly. A bus ride away, Carmen Duncan
and Paula. Two blocks away Bill Pike, the
founder of Rebel Airways, now welcoming
his old friend home in the national
headlines, alongside "Ellis Russian Spy". A
good brave belly-landing man, gone bald
of course by now. Time passes. A block
away the Seventh Day Adventist church
that his grandfather founded in a mad
month in 1897. Beyond that the
The Tweed Daily. Leonard Teale had been an
announcer here, before he was a bomber
pilot over Europe and then Superman, and
John Hepworth a reporter, after he had
been a soldier and before he became a
lovely unsung playwright in the wrong
historical era. We all pass through,
thought Ellis. But why do we leave? And
for what do we leave? And is it enough?

She sobbed a trifle, and gazed operatically
round at the ornate ceiling as if in search of
a prompt. Ellis twitched in his seat, and
feared the worst. Then she reached
decisively into a box and pulled out of it a
human head. It was green in colour
and the texture of a prune. "There," she said."Isn't
that the most beautiful thing you've ever
seen?" "On the contrary," said Buzo,
putting it back in the box and heaping
pillows on top of it, "it's the most revolting
thing I've ever seen," and stalked out
slamming the door. Distressed by his
sudden absence the grande dame picked up
a Wedgwood pot and smashed it against a
Nolan. Then an old oak chair and crashed
it through the window. Then she fell to
canine whimpering, bliting a scarlet pillow.
Ellis felt out of his depth. He said he must
be going, dodged certain ill-aimed missiles
through the opulent front door and ran
like fury: "Au revoir..." came the
madwoman's ghostly basso through the
chill Fitzroy midnight and a further
tumultuous crash. Ellis, accelerating, was
then attacked and brought to earth in
murderous assault by a big black Alsatian
dog. Strangling this Stygian beast away
from him, he lurched dishevelled to his
knees and hailed a taxi. "Carlton Street
Carlton," he moaned; and was well on his
way to Albury when the Croatian madman
at the wheel confessed that in all his two
hours driving cabs he had never heard of
this Carlton. An hour later they attained
via Essendon at a mere forty dollars cost
Buzo's locked front door. Ellis, keyless,
kicked the bell. Buzo came down in his
nightshirt. "What are you doing here? he
shouted. "Go back and comfort that
woman. Otherwise she'll die alone, and
leave moreover a suicide note that
implicates me."

Ellis refrained from
getting used to the subtle rhythms of city life.

The moths, in hundreds, followed him
worshipfully into his big bright house. He
sat down amid a nightmare of clashing
laminex and got wearily to work on his
first multinational travesty, a screenplay of
The Pirates of Penzance, to be filmed in
Tasmania with Maree Osmond, the
brazenly smiling Salt Lake singing virgin
as Mabel the British heroine, Ted
Hamilton, the semi-Californian co­
producer, as the cockney constable, and he
presumed Rock Hudson as the modern
Major-General. Ellis needed the money, to
pay off the house in which he sat, looking
out through tinted louvres at pawpaw
leaves in the cricketing dark and dumbly
conjouring virgins of yore. He should, he
realised, have married Delys Cumming,
later the north coast Banana Queen, but
she had hated the implied threat of his
rhyming surname and so became the local
optometrist's mistress for twenty years.

This... is real, he thought, looking out
in the night at the ordinary silent town
and feeling ordinary too, with relief. That... is
not. He closed the score and went to bed.

"Ellis old son, I have great news," said
the voice on the phone. "Whitburn," said
Ellis, divining at once in his Mephisto­
phelian mellifluity the large, trim-bearded,
Liberal-voting advertising fraud whose
uplourious and triumphant alcoholic force
The Seige of Frank Sinatra had lately sent
the King O'Malley Theatre Company
uplouriously broke. "What is it Whi...
I sighed Ellis, monumentally incurious. "I should have bought into the area, my brother's razoo. " What's happening to the film of starveling, hawking Dostoevskian monologues from door to door. And look at you. And that's where you get your imagery."

"Who is this man Ellis?" mocked Kim Philby from the Australian. NFA. No further action. Feigned a heart attack, thus ur-Ellis did, and retired home, it seemed, to rural Australia. Murwillumbah probably. Quite right too. Never should have left. Should have stayed a caterpillar in the mud, and never dared the neon glory of Broadway. The glory that kills as quick as look at you.

"Don't live in Balmain," said Whitburn, wearying of this crass reminder of old betrayals and anxious to get on with the next. "First the good news. Max Cullen and I have formed the Balmain Theatre Company, which will have the same policy as yours and vie for the same subsidy." Ellis reeled. "You have my very best wishes," he gasped, "what's the bad news?" "The bad news is that he is eligible to write for it you must live in Balmain. "But I," said Ellis, feeling an ominous thumping in his heart, "don't live in Balmain." "Exactly," said the vast, Ustinovian four-flusher. "Sorry old lad, but that's showbiz. Unless of course you want to buy into the area, my brother's in real estate, it'll cost you a packet."

"But," sobbed Ellis, "You wouldn't even be in show business if it hadn't been for me. When I found you, you were a five stone starveling, hawking Dostoievskian monologues from door to door. And look at you now. Eighteen stone. "You may rest assured," said Whitburn, "that I will always be grateful for the memory of your help."

Ellis awoke in a bed full of dead moths. All had suicided against the thousand watt neon inexplicably still aglow in the ceiling above his head. He picked up a handful of these ruined idealists, gone to their pointless fiery Valhalla and pondered soberly. "Ah well," he muttered aloud, "that's showbiz," the familiar truncation, sounding shallower now in the wake of the loathsome Whitburn, gave to his mouth a strange, flat, wispy, dead taste. Divining the cause he spat out a moth and then with maudlin gravity consigned him and his fellow doomed Gene Kellys (gotta sing, gotta dance) to an unjust flushing oblivion.

"That's both an interesting theory," said Osborne, examing him coldly, "and a devastating admission. I had a dream this morning," he went on with glazed eyes vaguely, ingesting a further grizzled canape with the air of one who has lived, "in which black cockatoos in sunrise were beating at the glass of my hotel window, with their heads and swirled Adventist congregation and screaming, in perfect Australian accents, 'Cripes! The solitude, mate! The loneliness of the bush! But don't you fuckin' knock it 'cause it's all we've fuckin' got!'"

His own Australian accent was of course impeccable, and Ellis, remembering his background as a mischievous travelling actor, hoarding house to hoarding house, upstage to upstage, grasped with delight at his essential ordinariness, however dressed up it was in sulphuric invective, and the fundamental ordinariness of all who write. It's all we've got, this rooted human ordinariness, like the loneliness of the bush, but we must try it on the universe nonetheless, and die like moths against the judging lights of God and Kippax. Or must we? Why not stay at home instead?

Ordinary people, thought Ellis, approaching down Main Street the frock shop of his Auntie Lol. My grandsires were buried here, and dug up to provide a housing estate. I have left a dead sister here, killed on Highway One, and two dead cousins, killed on Highway One separate collisions. An uncle struck by lightning while playing golf who survived to moulder away, a snoring alcoholic in front of my mother's TV. An auntie who washed the fouled sheets of the dying and bullied them into their graves. An uncle who travelled in biros, and one who dug for diamonds, and one who worked in a sugar mill down all his days. These too must be served. They should not pass. Dickens' people came here to the North Coast, thought Ellis, I know because I have met them. Peggyotty and Micawber, Magwitch and Gummidgie: they light up my dreams and bring joy to my nearing age. They shall not pass. He entered the Austral Cafe, and bought a milkshake, and felt at home. The first girl he ever kissed came up and sat by his side, and said with pungent disbelief, "You're the only human being I've met in this country. Why do you think this is?"

"Because," said Ellis, rallying with effort and fogging, "that's showbiz." the familiar truncation, nonetheless, and die like moths against the dreaming lights of God and Kippax. Or must we? Why not stay at home instead?
Theatre Australia Guide to Playwriting

Edited by John McCallum

There has not been a dramatic revival for quite some time — largely because we haven't needed one. It can take hundreds of years for a young culture to find its own voice, to establish an autonomous, mature cultural tradition (particularly in the most complex of arts, the theatre) but when it comes it is, in AD Hope's words, "sudden, brilliant and permanent."

There is no doubt that it has come, in theatre and film, during the last decade. And probably the greatest single contribution, in theatre at least, has been made by playwrights. The two great theatrical success stories of the 70s, the APG and Nimrod, have built up their reputation by close association with different writers. It is to a large degree Australian plays that have won the new audiences. It is the new Australian drama that has received the most critical attention. (Although that is a bias that ought to be rectified, as critics begin to look seriously at new theatrical styles generally.)

And yet many playwrights still feel they are the poor cousins of the theatre. To open this playwrights' issue Theatre Australia asked a number of Australian writers for the theatre to comment, both generally and personally.

David Williamson

"Pressure on governments to increase funding."

My feeling is that in the eighties we will see an explosion of Australian creativity on all fronts. The obvious boom in the film industry is already with us and this year's Playwright's Conference attracted a record number of scripts. A process of artistic self definition and self assertion is occurring which perhaps has a parallel in the flurry of artistic activity in Elizabethan England when its writers suddenly discovered that they didn't have to forever regard themselves as a European backwater, but had the power in their own hands to create their own myths and in a sense invent themselves.

This doesn't mean endless regurgitations of Ned Kelly. Shakespeare set his plays wherever there was the possibility of finding drama, but they were nonetheless plays which could only have been written by an Englishman coming out of a specific social, political and historical setting.

The main need for Australian theatre is to have the venues and the production expertise to give this burst of creativity a fair hearing in our theatres. The Federal and State policy of some years back, to fund only one or two groups in a Capital is thankfully on the retreat, but the dissemination of theatrical funding could go much further. Pressure on Federal and State governments to increase the total funding, so that new companies can be accommodated without lowering the standards of existing ones, is an urgent priority. Perhaps the most urgent. Experience around the world shows that bold new writing seldom surfaces outside the subsidised arena, and it would be foolish to think our experience will be any different.

Jack Hibberd

"Still at the stage of idols and iconoclasm."

The central problems confronting Australian playwrights today are not the immediately professional and industrial, ie, contracts, residencies, relationships with boards, management and conferences. They are cultural and artistic, the more long-term problems.

As I see it, the two most pernicious phenomena likely to affect, directly or indirectly, the Australian playwright these days are the instant elevation of some of our good writers to the status of cultural heroes and the persistence of the Cultural Cringe.

The first tends to sap the fêted writer of personal critical and creative vigour, luring him or her into the self-caressing quagmires of cultdom and overproduction. In an immature and sensationalist milieu (partly the product of a fatuous trend-frenzied media) a real peril of instant lionization is instant dismissal once the inevitable stultification occurs. We are still at the stage of idols and iconoclasm.

Related to all of this is the enduring treatment of Australian plays as novelties by the profession and public;
in Australia

once successful they promptly disappear into a literary fog. There is little serious reinterpretation and revaluation of our drama on the stage. We are happily creating a theatre without a history, neglecting to build a living tradition for the contemporary theatre to respond to and against.

The Cultural Cringe is alive and well, as manifested by the uncritical adulation of such second-rate writers as Handke, Fassbinder and Mamet, the servile approval given to the Old Vic's stale and effeminate Hamlet, and the barely disguised relief emanating when some local writers turn away (quite legitimately) from Australia as a subject.

Many artistic directors, despite their noble programming records, deep down consider Australia unworthy of serious artistic consideration. Many of their productions reveal this unease, sometimes superciliousness, before the local bestiary. Rather than enjoy a grapple with the dingo, they much prefer to draw his distasteful fangs or dress him in the circus clothes of facetiousness.

Paradoxically, the only important new directions in recent Australian theatre have had little to do with the playwrights and nothing to do with the mainstream theatre.

I refer to the Melbourne-engendered Community Theatre movement as well as to Fitzroy's raw and ebullient theatre restaurants, a breeding ground for social and political satire. There are now six professional community theatre companies operating within Victoria's sphere of influence. Should this movement expand around Australia, it could eventually stimulate the growth of a grass roots theatre culture, an infrastructure sadly lacking at the moment.

I find these developments far more exciting and crucial to the future of Australian theatre than anything happening within the conventional and alternative areas or in recent writing (including my own).

They are unquestionably of much more significance (hence their neglect by the Sydnocentric national press) than the Melbourne-to-Sydney transportations which have to do with mere life styles, employment and careers, not ideas or fresh directions.

Roger Pulvers

“Melbourne-Sydney rivalry as bunkum.”

I want to say that there is at least one person working in theatre in Melbourne who sees the 'Melbourne-Sydney rivalry' as bunkum.

Why did we let the media latch on to this and puff it into an issue? Sure, there are cultural differences between the two cities — a different lifestyle of theatre. Sydney is invariably more showy, more up-front theatrical and effective. Melbourne is lay-back, pensive, and wicked.

But I feel no rivalry at all. Both cities have excellent writers, directors, actors, and designers. If anything, they complement, not negate, each other. We must rid ourselves of this false notion. If we want to make comparisons, let's compare ourselves with the best theatre we've seen in other countries. Australian theatre is most certainly a part of world theatre.

Now, there must be a more vigorous commitment to experimental theatre in this country. Experimental theatre is the Research and Development of our stage culture. I feel we are moving beyond the phase of mirrored recognition of ourselves on stage. Our theatre must use the stage as demonstration of those aspects in our personalities which we ourselves know are there but are afraid to recognize. Criticism that celebrates has a liver of lily and a knee as weak as water.

To be specific, we need theatre that looks at our problems through the eyes of migrants (not vice versa); that debunks our soft-core romantic nationalism — which is really part and parcel of our nagging provincialism; that explores our history in such a way that it exposes a whole sub-text of causes that our media would have us believe do not exist.

A theatre of possibilities in a country where newspapers have reneged their role of watchdog opens the stage for playwrights — let's get our teeth into the official pant legs and not let go till the bastards howl.

Dorothy Hewett

“I'm not at all happy with my professional role.”

Having just experienced my most exciting and successful theatre season
with *The Man from Mukinupin* at the Sydney Opera House I am disposed to be benign, but will struggle against the temptation.

Things are I believe looking up for the Australian playwright. Evidence: A more general acceptance of our work by the public, management, directors, perhaps even reviewers, although they lag behind badly in the structure. I have never had any problems with actors, designers, or stage technicians generally.

After having worked with Rodney Fisher on the *Mukinupin* season I know now what I have always believed possible, and occasionally, sporadically experienced, that it is possible for director, playwright, cast, designer, lighting expert, to work together in glorious harmony, and for the playwright to be an integral and central member of that team work. It will now be my ambition to repeat the experience.

Generally speaking I’m not at all happy with my professional role in the structure and management of theatre. I still long to be associated with an actual company in the working out of scripts, and the general life of that company. A few lucky mavericks seem to have achieved this but for me it remains a mirage. Until such a situation is taken for granted I don’t see how the Australian playwright can be anything else but an outsider.

It’s difficult to talk about the theatre in this country as a whole because it varies so extraordinarily from state to state, company to company, director to director. There are still centres of hidebound conservatism, ineptitude, bullying, exclusiveness, but the general picture for the playwright is more optimistic.

Examples: (1) I sat in on all the discussions in the opening weeks of *Mukinupin*, both in the group and with individual actors. I was warmly welcome at all rehearsals, and my opinions sought for and carefully listened to. Never once was I ever made to feel that I was not an important and central component of the final success of the production. That I can instance this an unusual and deeply rewarding experience proves I suppose how rare such experiences still are.

(2) Before the rehearsal period of a new childrens’ play commissioned for Magpie in South Australia I was flown to Adelaide to take part in discussions on set design, lighting, costumes and casting. This has never happened to me before in the preliminary stages.

(3) The Director of the Perth Playhouse upped my percentage for the season of a newly commissioned play on his own volition (from 8½% to 10%), on the grounds that a twice commissioned playwright deserves a slice more out of the final cake.

Counter examples: In Melbourne Jim Cotter, the composer’s original music, was not used in the MTC production of *Mukinupin*. They refused to pay his final asking fee of 3½%. All other professional companies paid him 4% for a complex musical score. The MTC at scandalously short notice decided to commission another composer at a much cheaper rate. The result was a big drop in the standard of the play.

There were other problems in Melbourne: The theatre was far too small to accommodate the world of *Mukinupin*. The problems of the Opera House stage were used to great advantage in Sydney, in Melbourne the result was a cluttered production. The problems of marrying script to theatre are always major ones, particularly in Australia, where Australian plays are still too often relegated to the smaller spaces, irrespective of whether they suit the particular piece or not.

Music theatre has its own particular problems, and as most of my plays have been “plays with music” as separate from “musicals”. I’ve had considerable experience in this area. Many managements refuse to take the musical component seriously, many directors don’t understand the use of music, many of the budgets make little if any accommodation for the composer or the musicians. We all know the problems: music tends to make the budget leap drastically, but a few actors playing a medley of musical instruments on stage is no substitute for even a small orchestra of professionals.

The woman playwright has a double struggle, as Australian and as a woman in a predominantly male structure. This is a very complex question, but seems to boil down to the fact that women do have a point of view, a style, a sensibility, which has hardly touched the theatre in this country, and the theatre is the poorer because of it.

What would I like to see in the next few years? A still wider appreciation of differing styles of theatre (although this is improving), more time given to new scripts in reading, discussion and rehearsal, greater attention to matching director and script, script design and actual space, deeper understanding of the special needs of music theatre, and the involvement of the playwright in all areas of the production, as much as humanly possible.

From “darling of the academics” to a popular success in most capitals has been a long step in one short year. Without the support of students, and academics and earlier on, the student theatres themselves, I doubt if I’d have survived in the Australian theatre. I will always be grateful for that support and hope I’ll continue to have it. I’ve got a strange feeling that the gap between so called “academic, poetic theatre” and a popular success is not so far or so deep anyway, and is largely self created by the conservatives and the diehards who can’t see the wood for the trees.

Barry Oakley

“If playwrights could run a theatre of their own…”

What I would like to see, arising out of the Playwrights’ Conference, is a theatre that would have writers in its structure and management — ie, a playwrights’ theatre. There is a sense, especially with the larger, more institutionalized theatres, that the writer is the supplier of no more than puff paste — which then goes through a series of sometimes impersonal processes to come out as a cake at the other end. If playwrights could run a theatre of their own there would probably be endless fights but the writer would at least be involved in the theatre structure, and not have the
haphazard and temporary relationship that he tends to have with managements of a more conventional kind.

David Allen

"It's nearly always the writer who cops the shit."

I think there are managements and directors who are open to all kinds of subjects and styles and will give you a fair go. We all know who they are and we all send them our work! I am increasingly aware, though, that the right director, cast and theatre is essential for the presentation of a script. If a play bombs it's nearly always the writer who cops the shit. That's because critics are writers of sorts as well.

I think that the state of playwriting is pretty healthy at the moment. New writers are springing up all the time and there are a lot of good new plays about. The direction I'd like to see developing is the one where scripts deal with Australian problems and concerns less parochially and on a broader canvas. We can't escape the world politically — we're all part of the universal angst.

John Romerill

"Fruits of the revolution not equally shared."

You could do worse than Currency Press's 1980 Book List as an object for scholarship. Whatever you concluded would have a certain validity because Currency doesn't just trade in this nation's dramatic literature, to a significant extent Currency's list is this nation's dramatic literature.

Arranged alphabetically by author the list carries a photograph of perhaps half the titles, and a blurb on most. Also listed are each play's casting requirements.

Adding up, always an undignified form of human labour, is something best left to a computer but I did my sums on 16 of this glossy brochure's 27 columns.

Of the Australian content this can be said: if Currency's list is this nation's dramatic literature then this nation's dramatic literature has been erected on the backs of 338 male and 156 female characters. In other words this nation's dramatic literature has created 182 more jobs for men than it has for women. A ratio of better (meaning worse) than 2 to 1. If the plays employ fewer women than men so does the press. Of the 35 writers listed in the sample, a mere five were women, a ratio of 6 to 1.

Even more shattering is that while these five women add 48 female parts to the national dramatic repertoire they enrich it to the tune of 50 parts for men. The 30 men on the other hand manage only 108 female parts for the 280 parts for men they've written. Thus one sex, it seems, theatrically refracts socio-economic reality via all but equal numbers of men and women. The other refracts its Australia by marshalling the witness of men over women in a ratio of almost 3 to 1.

Vive la difference? Or why the difference?

In terms of stock, plant and productive capacity Currency Press is a real gain. Ten years of virtual cultural revolution have brought into being a press capable of keeping a large part of the nation's dramatic literature in print and before the public.

To suppose, however, that our cultural revolution has succeeded, or that it is finished, is wrong. As Currency's list shows the fruits of the revolution have not been shared equally by men and women. Thus the long march is far from over.

Errol Bray

"I think many directors are scared of writers."

(Errol Bray wrote in some detail about his experiences at Nimrod during rehearsals for The Choir. Other playwrights kept their complaints more general, but if Bray's experience is at all common — and only other writers know whether it is — then it shows how important closer involvement of writers is.)

The problem lay in what I see as a general attitude in the theatre world that playwrights are somehow ignorant, untrained people who know nothing about theatre and little about life but happen to be lucky enough to scribble a few words that the truly creative people — directors, actors and administrators — can turn into saleable products. I think many directors are scared of writers and scared of admitting the basic creative importance of the playwright.

Having an iron-clad contract does not solve a playwright's problems. I had an excellent contract with Nimrod — one that paid me a full salary for four weeks of rehearsals and gave me great billing and a good percentage etc. However the reality is that taking a play away from a company is the only sanction or power a playwright has. How can you take your first play (or any play) away from a company with Nimrod's reputation? And where do you draw the line? Just because they treat you badly doesn't mean the production will be bad, does it? Probably, yes! Just because they change your play — despite a clause in the contract forbidding this — in several crucial spots doesn't mean the end result need be bad, does it? Probably, yes!

When actors and a director change a script they don't have the creative responsibility for the overall script and structure. The writer should be entrusted with that but seems trusted very little at all. Neil made many changes to The Choir that I had protested vigorously about in rehearsals, giving detailed reasons why the changes would be bad — I was never allowed to say my creative intuition tells me so — and Neil made the changes in the final production when I wasn't at rehearsals. His excuse was that the play wouldn't work as it was and some specific lines and actions "just wouldn't work". The play had worked in Canberra as a reading and Bryan Nason at TN Theatre had no problems in doing the whole play. It was exciting to see Bryan's production to see my whole

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The Politics of Playwriting

by John McCallum

Playwriting in Australia has suffered historically from a number of disadvantages. It began in a century when theatre was an actors' medium, and has developed, in this century, while theatre has become more and more a directors' medium. Add to this the Australian playwright's long alienation from the commercial stage, caused by the commercial management's sycophantic reliance on overseas plays, and what is surprising is not that Australian drama has developed so late, but that it has developed at all.

In the 19th century writers had virtually no influence on or reward from their plays at all, after they had been given (or sold for, say, 10/-) to the managers. Writers like George Darrell and Alfred Dampier, in the 1870s and 80s, overcame this only by being also their own leading actors, managers and, often, theatre lessees. In this century playwrights are protected legally from gross exploitation, but there has never been a time, in the history of Australian theatre, when playwrights have been given prime importance. There has never been a time, however brief, when playwrights could establish their role in the theatre, for later times to respect.

Recently playwrights have managed to get in by the back door. A rapidly growing theatre scene has, rather belatedly, discovered that it helps if writers are given a place somewhere. But they still have no real theatrical power — only the rather useless right to withhold their scripts. Directors and theatre managers, with the best will in the world (which they don't always have), cannot allow playwrights the influence their contribution demands, the theatrical power structure being what it is. As a result Australian drama is still proceeding in fits and starts, talented playwrights are ignored, mediocre ones elevated, and those plays which do get on may be misunderstood and misdirected.

There is no reason why theatre should not be, at different times, an actors' or directors' medium. The problem for writers is that here it has never been theirs.

There are, of course, many theatres and other charitable organizations which aim, quite sincerely, to help, guide, develop, foster, nurture or otherwise look after Australian playwrights. In this decade of minority movements, however, such outside charity is not enough. The first important organization, therefore, in this survey of playwriting politics, is the Australian Writers' Guild.

THE AWG

The recent relative militancy of the Writers' Guild is a sign of the new role Australian writers are seeking for themselves. The Guild's negotiation of new contracts, including a new Stage Contract; and bits of small-scale industrial action (over delays in the negotiation of a contract with the ABC, and over rates for the Humphrey Bear programme with NWS 9 in Adelaide, and its parent company NBN 3 in Newcastle) indicate a flexing of muscles on the part of the writers. In particular the Stage Group of the Guild is concerned to counter the prejudices that writers are by definition unskilled and incompetent in the ways of the theatre. They point to directors whose managerial deficiencies have caused problems in theatres, and to the dearth of good theatre managers generally, and ask...
why writers should be singled out as the incompetent ones. They resent the old idea that writers are impractical garret dreamers, which is still sometimes used as an excuse for keeping them off boards and out of positions of power.

THE ANPC
Some members of the Stage Group have recently been making a push into the Australian National Playwrights' Conference. The ANPC began eight years ago as another charitable organization, designed to nurture new writers and encourage and help them in the development of their craft. Recently it has begun to swing over to writer-control. At the 1980 Annual General Meeting a motion was passed which made significant representation of writers on the General Committee mandatory. Dramaturgs now must be writers and there is a move for the Artistic Director to be a writer. Again, the playwrights involved resist the notion that, being writers, they cannot run their own conference. The move is manifested in this year's Conference, which places much more emphasis than before on "established" writers, and less on new writers. Of the eight plays to be workshopped, two are by writers in Theatre Australia's Top 15 — Dorothy Hewett and Alma de Groen — and another two by writers mentioned in the Guide — Clem Gorman and Bob Herbert. From being a school for young playwrights the ANPC is becoming a self-run, fully professional Conference.

THE LITERATURE BOARD
Government subsidy, of course, is one form of charity which most writers don't object to, although they often object to the way in which it is administered. (Not too loudly, times being what they are.) In the last two years the Literature Board of the Australia Council has swung away from funding playwrights for work by themselves, and has begun the Writers-in-Residence scheme whereby they are encouraged to work in the hurly-burly of real, live theatres. Whether this scheme will be a success, in the present theatrical power-structure, remains to be seen, but it raises questions of how public money can best be distributed:

Playwriting competitions. These were very popular in the 50s (when playwrights first began to be seriously patronized) which ought to be a sign that they don't work. The recent scandalous competition run by the Queensland Theatre Company, in which the "prize" money was in effect an advance against royalties, should have put an end to them now.

Living Allowances, Fellowships, etc. These at least free writers from financial worries (up to a point) and allow them to get on with their work. Unfortunately they also tend to widen the gap between writers and the theatre - setting them aside outside the companies they are supposed to be working for.

Writers-in-Residence Schemes. This obviously overcomes the above problem — although, again, only up to a point. The danger for writers lie in theatre companies which expect special rights to work produced during the residency, or expect extra, unpaid work — playreading, bit part acting, etc. At present the short periods of the grants (up to 6 months) do not allow writers to develop a full working relationship with a company, but at least they are in the theatres. Too many writers, however, find that they finish their residency, present a script, and see it go the way of all the unsolicited scripts they had sent before. For this reason the scheme might be combined more closely with...

Commissions. For a long time these were popular, but notably useless for the writers, except as small additional sources of income. The trouble was that there used to be no guarantee, or even likelihood, of production of the completed play. (One well known playwright received a commission in the early '70s from the UNSW Drama Foundation — partly responsible for the Jane Street Australian Play Seasons — and had the final play rejected and sent back with some undergraduate "Notes for Playwrights" to guide him in his future efforts! Similar stories abound.)

Now useful commissions seem to be becoming common, partly because the playwrights themselves have greater stature. (Big River, Celluloid Heroes, The Man From Muckinupin, etc.) If this sort of respect for playwrights carried through into the general artistic management of our theatres then playwrights would have a lot less to complain about. With some sort of qualified guarantee of production commissions are obviously a way of also strengthening the Writers-in-Residence scheme and making the experience much more productive for the writer.
While I was working on the editing of Peter Holloway's *Contemporary Australian Drama,* a collection of critical writing which has taken four years to put together, I took it for granted that we were in the middle of an ongoing rush of theatrical activity and radical change on which we had to impose some balance and perspective.

Looking at it now, all those playwrights and critical passions between covers, it somehow makes manifest the end of an era.

The book opens with a mystical prologue by Douglas Stewart, in which he talks of literature — and playwriting — "creating" a nation. "The playwright," he says, "creates the myths by which the people live." And he ends by saying: "The play of the soil, after the poetic drama, is what I am myself most anxious to see; for, though of course I would welcome a city comedy, it seems to me that the kind of distillation of the search which we get in the plays of Synge and Chekhov is what is most grievously overdue in Australia."

That was 1955. The epilogue is given to Jack Hibberd: a gloomy piece which asks what are we doing and why. "With the burgeoning of an indigenous theatre and the open nationalism of the Whitlam period, we thought we had the real makings of a national culture of ‘identity’... A sober and astringent reality has returned. Hopes have been curtailed. Hence the stasis, the calm. Hence the drear subterranean feeling that the bulk of the work is still to be done, that we are almost back where we started."

He adds that the setback to our hopes may prove beneficial and ends with a paragraph as stirring as Sydney Barrett's election speech in Esson's *The Time Is Not Yet Ripe* enumerating Australia's needs. "We need" Hibberd concludes, "an awful lot. But are we in the mood?" Back in 1912 Barrett concluded the public was not in the mood.

Let us hope Hibberd's cudgels will be taken up by the next generation.

The fact is, of course, that we are all 15 years older than we were when the first tentative ripples of the new wave lapped the back streets of Melbourne and Sydney. There was revolution to be waged and in spirit the creation of a new independent nation. Since then Douglas Stewart has had his plays of...
the soil, his poetic drama and his city comedies — sometimes all three in the same work. But I doubt they were the kind of plays he expected or particularly welcomed.

For it is the clowns and the satirists among our writers, not the idealists, that in the last decade have created, or rather revealed, the myths by which people live; and they have done it with a savagery that no previous generation has dared. It has been a cleansing operation, holding up to the light the secrets of the Australian character, its poetry, sentimentality, gallantry and vulgarity. For ours is a comic spirit and only in humour is the underlying tragedy honestly revealed. Take the rebellious Sally Banner in The Chapel Perilous being greeted by reporters at the end of her lifelong search for immortality:

CHORUS: What are your plans for the future?
SALLY: Cremation.
Or Sandy Stone's last words, summing up the satisfactions of his small, sterile life:
The Harpic is cleaning while I sleep.
Or Monk O'Neil, the misanthropic hermit of A Stretch of the Imagination:
A man's best friend is his dog. Even

Max Gillies as Monk O'Neill: "I shot my dog".

woman cannot attain the high standard of companionship afforded by the dumb canine. A man. His God. A man. I shot my dog.
Such ironies are the myths by which we live.

The greatest contribution the playwrights of the 70s have made to the creation of our nation is the elevation of the Australian language. So great has been their success that, in the natural course of things, we no longer listen as we used. The playwright in 1981 is not the leader of thought that he was in 1973. The director and actor are reasserting themselves — or asserting, in the case of the actor. The time is right for an actors' revolution, p

I do not mean that the playwright's discovery of the vernacular was new. It runs through the history of our theatre — older by far than plays like Rusty Bugles or Summer of the Seventeenth Doll. But before 1966 it was encased in a structure that was foreign — adapted, true, but foreign. Genre comedy, melodrama, burlesque, social realism, Expressionism, we have them all. And it is also true that there are links in Buzo's early writing with Pinter and Ionesco, in Hibberd's with Beckett, in Hewett's with O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. And so on. But what all these writers have done — most notably Williamson, who on the surface may appear a straightforward realist writer — is allow the ways in which the characters express themselves to dictate the shape of the play.

Through the labours of such writers we achieved a theatre more truly in accord with the Australian consciousness than any since the end of

Nowra's Inside The Island. An increasing number of male writers putting women in the leading role. Photo: Peter Holderness.
the last century when commercial melodrama was tuned continually by actors in response to their audience.

As the 1970’s progressed two things happened: the playwrights started to run out of puff and the audience stopped responding to the shock of the new. The causes were several; partly the shock was not new any more, partly the changed political climate no longer stimulated the public to change or action, partly the comfortable new theatres were less demanding of action by playwrights, actors and audience and less stimulating to the imagination, than the old makeshift ones. Spartan conditions, once an adventure, now assumed a lower status.

Meanwhile, what of the new playwrights?

I think it is symptomatic of the new decade of writers that so many are turning to historical fact for inspiration, not in the mood of indecent self-exposure of ten years ago but as a kind of defence against that sort of theatre. The plays seem to reveal a need to set at a distance what they want to say about Australia — again a reactionary move against the kind of eye-of-the-hurricane that characterised early Williamson, Romeril and Hibberd. Louis Nowra, David Allen, George Hutchinson, Rob George, Stephen Sewell and Roger Pulvers are examples of this kind of writer — writers in themselves very different from one another. Of these Nowra and Pulvers are most personal in their writing. Their characters inhabit a landscape entirely their own and they have made a thesis of their need to place at a distance the barbarity of that world. Looked at dispassionately a new intellectual kind of cruelty is creeping into our theatre, a cruelty that has not been there before, because it points the finger of accusation at the audience.

“The biggest clod in all my plays,” Williamson once said disarmingly, “is always me.”

A second quality the new writers have in common — and here I would add Errol Bray to the list — is the need to be didactic. Faced with a public inert and self-satisfied, supplied with a variety of theatre unrealised ten years ago, they are sometimes impatient with the dramatic means of discovery and want to shake us into caring. It is a characteristic of the new work that it often has a figure step out of the action to express the views of the author.

As with the earlier wave, form has proved initially more innovative than content. Audiences are captured by the spectacular visual effects of Nowra’s work, the anarchic cartoonery of Barry Dickins, the ballad rhymes of Hutchinson’s No Room for Dreamers, the brutality of Sewell’s Traitors and Bray’s The Choir. A significant advance has been the way such plays can become the vehicle for a director.

The playwrights of the late ‘60s not only invented new forms but had to create the theatres and the acting style to perform them. There is still some pioneering work going on but today promising writers have the facilities of the National Playwrights Conference, agencies, TV commissions; and once a theatre takes up a play all the money and imagination that theatre can afford will be lavished on it. It may not be the production they want, their advice may not be asked. On the other hand the production may exceed all their expectations. Either way they cannot say they have gone unnoticed.

The theatre has grown out of all recognition and we must thank God for that. But, as Hibberd says, we still need an awful lot.

So what of the ‘80s?

The new form that may persuade us to listen again is music theatre. Music has permeated the theatre in the past decade, particularly in the work of Hibberd, Hewett and Nowra. And the demise of the JCW musical production opens the field to indigenous work as never before.

The recent success of Hewett’s The Man from Mukinupin in Sydney is significant. Since she left the New Fortune in Perth she has not found till now an environment to encompass her dense and free-flowing style. Her preoccupation with poetry and music has been inconvenient to management, not to mention her insistence upon taking female sexuality seriously. I foresee that Dorothy Hewett will be a major influence upon the theatre of the ‘80s because her work reflects the times. An increasing number of recent plays by male writers have had women in the leading role. Sally Banner has begun to look less intimidating.

It follows that the time is also ripe for other women playwrights. Doreen Clarke’s unselfconscious exposure of the exploited female is bringing her deserved success. And there will be others.

What of the older writers? Or have we closed the book on “contemporary” Australian drama? In a way we have. The theatre must keep changing. Some writers will change with it, some will not. Some may disappear and return to the theatre a decade later, like Patrick White did, when he felt the need.

The ’70s produced at least three great plays and a dozen more in the first rank. That is an extraordinary record for any country. Times have changed. If The Removalists had its premiere today it would be received very differently — possibly with hostility. It is foolish to expect our writers to remain the same — or to blame them if they do so. We should simply honour them for their part in the creation of a nation. To have written one good play is enough to deserve such honour.

But the history of the theatre is a history of fashion. And in fashion there is little respect, or progress. Only change.
ALEX BUZO

Writes with a dry, brittle, witty style, which he uses sensitively to explore personal moral dilemmas of his characters. Some people claim not to be able to see past the style — a view they must have sustained. He has come a long way since Norm and Ahmed (1968), Rooted (1969) and The Front Room Boys (1969), which were welcomed as part of the "new vernacular school" (1978) and of the late '60s. From Cockermotherism after all — but some reviewers got left behind. Audiences didn't, and Martello Towers (1976), Makassar Reef (1978) and Big River (1980) have continued to draw them in. Other plays: This Old Man Comes Rolling Home (1968) and The Beautiful Mrs Portland (1976) that she is perfectly capable of handling. Plays: Mrs Porter and the Angel (1969), The Chapel Perilous (1971), Bonbons and Roses for Dolly (1972), The Tatty Hollow Story (1974), Joan (1975), The Golden Oldies (1976), Pandora's Cross (1978), The Man From Muckinupin (1979), Susannah's Dreaming (1980).

JACK HIBBERD


DOROTHY HEWETT


JOHN ROMERIL

Our leading writer-theorist, his theory leads him to restrict his contribution in any show to that of humble fellow-worker — so although he is Australia's most prolific playwright he has only one generally acknowledged "major" play: The Floating World (1974). He is the most serious analyst of contemporary political, social and economic data on stage, and one of the most entertaining. Plays: A Nameless Concern (1968), Mr. Big the Big Big Pig (1969), The American Independence Hour (1969), Kitchen Table (1969), I Don't Know Who To Feel Sorry For (1969), Chicago Chicago (1969), Dr Karl's Kure (1970), Mrs Thally F (1971), 200 Years (1971), Dr Spock Play (1971), Rearguard Action (1971), Brudder Humphry (1971), Bastards (1972), He Can Swagger Sitting Down (1972), The Radioactive Horror Show (1977), Cry All You Want To (1979), Mickey's Moomba (1979), Carboni (1980), The Dud War (1980), The 200.000 (1980). With Jack Hibberd, Marvellous Melbourne (1970).

DAVID WILLIAMSON

Has such a successful, coherent body of work that people tend to use him, wrongly, as a model to describe the development of drama in the '70s. A sort of dramatic pluralist, he is working his way through various important Australian sub-cultures, analyzing and exploding them. He is the writer the most completely in touch with his audience, perhaps because of his satisfying ambivalence - half celebratory, half satirical. He has become a great writer of realistic comedy, and perhaps because he has been praised so much for that, he has allowed a great satirist to become partly submerged in the process. Much loved. Has never written a bummer. Plays: The Coming of Stork (1970), The Removalists (1971), Don's Party (1971), Jugglers Three (1972), What If You Died Tomorrow (1973), The Department (1974), A Handful of Friends (1976), The Club (1977), Travelling North (1979), Celluloid Heroes (1980).
ALMA DE GROEN
She's tough. Reviewers have complained that she isn't sympathetic enough to her characters, but knowing them you wouldn't want to be. She is to the important ones. Plays include: The Sweatproof Boy (1972), The Joss Adams Show (1972), Going Home (1976), Chidley (1977).

THOMAS KENEALLY
Keeps bouncing back into the theatrical kitchen, from the remoteness of the novelist's attic, and surprising people with his good narrative sense. Knows some good stories. Halloran's Little Boat (1966), Childermas (1968), An Awful Rose (1972), Bullie's House (1980).

PETER KENNA
A great survivor. At his best he writes richly and personally about the transience of values and the difficulties of loving. The Slaughter of St. Teresa's Day (1959) stood out among the "slum realist" plays for its Irish energy and loose, relaxed structure. A Hard God (1973) is one of the most moving of all Australian plays. Others include: Talk To The Moon (1971), Listen Closely (1972), Mates (1975), Furtive Love (1978), An Eager Hope (1978).

RAY LAWLER
Has never had the influence the range and scope of his work suggests he ought. A dramatic bower-bird, his oeuvre looks a bit like Marx's pawn shop: Flash Jim Vaux (1971), Hamlet On Ice (with Michael Boddy, 1971), President Wilson in Paris (1973), The Christian Brothers (1975), Mad Bad And Dangerous To Know (1976), Marx (1978), Last Day at Woooloomooloo (1979) — an odd mixture of styles and subjects. Writes great parts for actors.

BARRY OAKLEY

LOUIS NOWRA
Another paradox. He writes with a rich theatrical imagination, has a grandly epic, fast-moving narrative style; is civilized and erudite; and yet the overall effect is surprisingly austere. He has a flair for startling images and juxtapositions. Plays: Albert Names Edward (1976), Inner Voices (1977), Visions (1978), Inside the Island (1980), The Precious Woman (1980).

PATRICK WHITE
Has suffered a lot because he's a Tall Poppy and because people think he doesn't like them. Reviewers complained 15 years ago that he was too difficult and mixed styles too much. He came back in 1977 with a more conventionally structured play, with an ambitious subject, and they turned round and said it was too straightforward. One of Australia's most influential playwrights in the '60s, his great vision is often ignored these days, by small minds. The Ham Funeral (1961), The Season at Sarsaparilla (1962), A Cheery Soul (1963), Night On Bald Mountain (1964), Big Toys (1977).
MICHAEL BODDY

A great source of fun in the early '70s with The Legend of King O'Malley (with Bob Ellis, 1970), Biggles (with Ellis, Blair and Co., 1970), Hamlet on Ice (with Blair, 1971), and others. Later, wrote shows for Sydney's Music Hall, including Lust For Power; or, Perils at Parramatta (1978), The Huge Success of The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin (1976), in this country of shallow passing enthusiasms, probably meant that anything he wrote after was bound to be ignored. He's flip, sometimes facile, but always theatrical and lively, and was bound to be ignored. He's colourful, unusual subjects. Was a strong advocate for a local Australian drama, dealing with local themes, before he left the country to live in London. In spite of his other writing his reputation in this country still rests on The One Day Of The Year (1960). Others include: Swamp Creatures (1957), Donny Johnson (1960), A Break In The Music (1966), Structures (1974), The Float (1980).

BOB ELLIS

Australia's oldest enfant terrible. A great collaborator. He writes terrific lines but needs help stringing them together. O'Malley (with Boddy, 1970), The Duke of Edinburgh Assassinated (with Dick Hall, 1971), Down Under (with Anne Brooksbank, 1975). When writing all by himself he has, at least, superb timing: opened The James Dossier (1975) the day after Whitlam was sacked and A Very Good Year (1980) the day John Lennon was shot.

MICHAEL COVE


BARRY DICKENS

Has not yet had much influence outside Melbourne. Colourful, wildly comic, undisciplined plays about good Aussie eccentrics going mad in lonely huts etc. Bridal Suite (1978), Fool's Shoe Hotel (1979), The Banana Bender (1980).

JOHN O'DONOGHUE


RODNEY MILGATE

Like White he was an innovator when it wasn't fashionable, then came back with a very conventional play when it was. A Refined Look at Existence (1966), At Least You Get Something Out Of That (1968), The Golden Pathway to Europe (1979).

ROGER PULVERS

Uncompromising, intellectual, serious — he explores the political morality of his times, drawing on what must be, in this country, a unique combination of international cultural influences. Plays include: Yamashita (1977), Cedoona (1978), Witold Gombrowicz in Buenos Aires (1978), Bertolt Brecht Leaves Los Angeles (1979).

STEVE J SPEARS

The huge success of The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin (1976), in this country of shallow passing enthusiasms, probably meant that anything he wrote after was bound to be ignored. He's flip, sometimes facile, but always theatrical and lively, and was bound to be ignored. He's colourful, unusual subjects. Young Mo (1975), There Were Giants In Those Days (1976), King Richard (1977), The Death of George Reeves (1979).

JIM MCNEIL

Great success with No Room For Dreamers (1978), he writes of historical figures to make legends out of them, and uses a range of stylistic devices which other writers ignore.

ALAN SEYMOUR

One of the best known of the "slum realists" of the '50s, although he has written other plays in other styles. Was a strong advocate for a local Australian drama, dealing with local themes, before he left the country to live in London. In spite of his other writing his reputation in this country still rests on The One Day Of The Year (1960). Others include: Swamp Creatures (1957), Donny Johnson (1960), A Break In The Music (1966), Structures (1974), The Float (1980).
Important Organisations

The Australian Writers’ Guild. The playwrights’ registered trade union. In these militant times all professional stage, screen and TV writers should belong. Writers who have never had a professional production may join as Associate Members, and receive many of the benefits. Write to: Angela Wales, AWG, Suite 505, 83 York Street, Sydney, 2000.

The Australian National Playwrights Conference. Helps new and established writers, mainly by workshopping and reading new scripts at an annual conference in Canberra in May. Write for details to: The Administrator, ANPC, 8/36 Clarence Street, Sydney, 2000.

The Australia Council. The Literature Board administers a range of grants to writers, chiefly, now, by subsidizing Writers-in-Residence. Write to: The Secretary, Literature Board, Australia Council, PO Box 302, North Sydney, 2060.

by arrangement with Ray Cooney and the Mermaid Theatre Trust (London)

and PAUL ELLIOTT

THE AUSTRALIAN ELIZABETHAN THEATRE TRUST

See Local Press for Booking Details.

SYDNEY: THEATRE ROYAL, LIMITED SEASON— From Tuesday, March 24

NEWCASTLE: CIVIC THEATRE— For ONE WEEK only— From Tuesday, April 28

CANBERRA: CANBERRA THEATRE— For ONE WEEK only— From Tuesday, May 5

MELBOURNE: COMEDY THEATRE— LIMITED SEASON— From Tuesday, May 12

PERTH: HIS MAJESTY’S THEATRE— LIMITED SEASON— From Wednesday, June 17

ADELAIDE: OPERA THEATRE— LIMITED SEASON— From Tuesday, July 7

BRISBANE: HER MAJESTY’S THEATRE— LIMITED SEASON— From Tuesday, July 28
play for the first time and to see just how well as a dramatic structure it did work.

Ironically, *The Choir* is a play about the way institutions diminish people and make them powerless. I felt diminished as a person and as a playwright by my experience with Nimrod. I am made powerless by their reputation — a reputation I respect for the achievements of people like John Bell and Richard Wherrett — and many playwrights would be made powerless by the fear that Nimrod and other major companies might not produce any more of their plays if they stir trouble. I have the same fear but the experience was so dreadful and humiliating that I feel I must speak out about it. I also took some action about the chopping around of my script by refusing permission for the Nimrod production to go to Adelaide — a fairly enormous financial and artistic step.

It's not all gloom, of course. Bryan Nason and the TN Company in Brisbane did an excellent and true production of *The Choir* which was also artistically better in every way than the Nimrod production. TN's treatment of me as a playwright at all levels of contact was wonderful. I felt really exhilarated by the experience of seeing my play done well and with enthusiasm and integrity.

**ON CRITICS**

**Dorothy Hewett**

Reviewers in Australia are a mystery to me, with a few honourable exceptions, and yet I believe that the critic should be an integral part of the theatre — with a wide and educated working knowledge. We all need good, informed, positive criticism, but not the personal prejudices and lack of insight of the average reviewer in Australia.

**Barry Oakley**

Quality reviewing is essential for an intelligent climate of awareness. Only one or two newspaper or magazine reviewers are capable of putting a play in a theatrical context — seeing it, for example, in terms of our own emergent tradition, the contemporary theatre scene generally, and the European tradition. These are like concentric circles, and a reviewer should bring this implicit awareness to every play, and test every play against it. Most of them have only one criterion — is it entertaining? Is it a good night out? A good play is a good night out, but it's a lot more as well.

**David Allen**

No writer ever thinks they've been reviewed fairly, surely? And there are critics and critics! There is no doubt in my mind however — particularly in the incestuous cultural community where I am at the moment based — that the power of the review is immense! And it doesn't matter who has written it! If it says there in black and white that the play is bad, nobody goes. The danger in a place where cultural politics is a vital element in the personal prestige game is that merit becomes less important than trend or acceptability, social or otherwise.

Professional writers want professional critics!
A great clown in an hour of need

by Irving Wardle

Not possessing a television set, I am always discovering wonderful new stage talents which have been known for years to the viewing millions; but even I was vaguely aware of the name of Rowan Atkinson as the star of a BBC comedy series called Not The Nine O'Clock News which lately carried off a Silver Rose at Montreux. From what I could glean from incoherent giggling descriptions, typical Atkinson sketches included a venomous roll-call by a prep school pedant ("Clingfilm. Ellsworth-Beast Major. Ellsworth-Beast Minor. F. Koff. Come on - grow up. Nibble. Orifice. Plectrum - put it away, Plectrum" etc.) and the lavatorial crisis of a leather-clad punk desperately trying to find the right zip.

None of this prepared me for the sight of Rowan Atkinson in Revue (Globe), which recently opened for a three-month season that was booked out by the end of the first week. With some musical backing and a few feed lines from his two self-effacing partners, Mr Atkinson holds the stage for two and a half hours in the most brilliantly sustained display of solo comedy that has yet come my way. One thing he does not deserve is his recent nomination as BBC Television Personality of the Year; for, judging from the Globe show, he has no continuous personality whatever. The whole thing is done through facial masks behind which the essential Atkinson, if such a creature exists, remains wholly concealed.

His physique imposes some limitations. With his slight figure and sharp elfish features, he is right outside the standard range of the burly British comedian. But where others generally specialise as victims or aggressors, Atkinson is as much in his element as a top dog as an underdog; as he is in switching from scripted material to wordless pantomime. The eyes bulge, the mouth twists into a bloated leer, the shoulders rise up to his ears — and there is a panic-stricken best man who has forgotten his speech, a modest bather trying to get his trunks on before he has taken his trousers off (and succeeding), or a Deep Southern M.C. introducing a mixed programme ("It's either finger-lickin' good or arse-wipin' bad").

As you will note from that list, there is nothing very startling about his choice of subjects, all of which could have appeared in Beyond the Fringe 20 years ago; and some of which did. Shakespearean production routines, for one, which Atkinson illustrates as a blank-faced chorus boy in blue tights, giving us a benign king with one physical defect, followed by a benign king with two physical defects; followed by messengers bringing good and bad news, and finally a messenger who thinks he is bringing good news until he unrolls the scroll.

What has changed in English comedy (and this also goes for John Cleese's generation) is the ruthlessness with which ideas are worked out. Atkinson gets to the expected climax and then keeps on building. In his wedding party sketch, the bride's father leads up to a carefully prepared insult to the bridegroom and then goes on until he has insulted everyone else in the room and the catering firm to which he is paying a bomb. Playing the Devil languidly welcoming new arrivals, he starts with adulterers ("over there, by that small guillotine") and atheists ("you must be feeling a bunch of right Charlies"), and then goes on to make a clean sweep of Americans and Christians ("I'm afraid the Jews were right.").

This kind of thing is supported by following physical actions through, like the adventures of a tin can tied to a dog's tail. If he sweeps the stage and empties the dust into his shoe, it is certain that, on exit, he will wonder what's wrong with his foot and empty the dust out again. If, lacking a handkerchief, he blows his nose in his pocket lining, it is only a matter of time before he forgetfully smuggles a sweet into the same pocket.

Some people have labelled this side of the show as schoolboy humour. To which you can only agree, while also observing that it still blows the roof off the theatre; that Atkinson can equally pick off adult targets in a couple of lethal gestures (he evokes Margaret Thatcher with a cordial handshake and a knee to the groin); and

Rowan Atkinson in Revue. Photo: Iain McKell.
that he is never funnier than when he is just standing there, mouth shut, not moving a muscle. In our hour of need we have found a great clown.

Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* (Royal Court) assembles three fine actors (Patrick Magee, Helen Mirren, Stephen Lewis) in the service of a cryptic fable about an Irish homecoming. Frank, the faith healer, elopes with a judge's daughter, acquires a ex-showbiz manager, and spends the next 20 years plying his steadily failing gift around the Scottish and Welsh hinterland until poverty and sexual warfare drive the trio back to Donnegal, where miraculously his gift returns just before he falls victim to a tactfully unspecified death squad. I take this to be an allegory on the artist's life, showing two ordinary people totally devoted to a hero who cares only for his capricious gift, which may help to explain why Mr Friel sabotaged his story by telling it in the form of four garrulous retrospective monologues including one by a dead man. Remember William Holden at the end of *Sunset Boulevard*!

"I hit the Ladies in waiting by Karl Levett

Of late on the stages of Broadway and Off Broadway it has definitely been Ladies' Day at the ballpark. The proliferation of vehicles for women has been matched by several outstanding performances by actresses - that leads to the sneaking suspicion that at the moment in New York theatre, the ladies certainly have the edge over their male counterparts.

Five very worthy female performances were on display at the recent Hudson Guild's production of John Murrell's *Waiting for the Parade*. The play is a series of scenes and monologues describing how five women survived the Second World War in Mr Murrell's home town of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Four of the women work in a Red Cross Centre, the fifth waits for the release of her German-born father from a Canadian internment camp.

The spectre of women living their lives through men, whom we come to know but never see, is neatly presented by Mr Murrell. In material of this sort, the risk of soap, opera excess is ever present but the playwright skates over this thin ice with just sufficient weight. Much of the play's humour is gained by Mr Murrell's affectionate detail in showing the women's painfully earnest attempts at the Red Cross Centre to be part of the distant war. For many Australian women these scenes would be quickly recognised as being very close to their own experiences during WWI. The authenticity of these scenes provides a much-needed supporting framework for this fragmented play.

Mr Murrell must also be credited with creating five full-bodied women's parts. With equal opportunity for all, probably Roxanne Hart's unfaithful Catherine and Marti Maraden's bossy Janet stand out. (Both these actresses were in last year's BAM Company and boy, are they sadly missed.) Jo Henderson as the German's daughter and last seen as the harried mother in *Ladyhouse Blues* is suddenly younger and charmingly elegant. Such minor theatrical miracles are always a pleasure.

The ill-fated Mary, Queen of Scots is a lady who has long fascinated creative artists. The latest version (and certainly the most curious) is *Mary Stuart* by the German playwright and novelist, Wolfgang Hildesheimer. Mr Hildesheimer is new to me but from the programme I see that he was born in 1916, has published several novels and two collections of plays (all in German) and translated at the Nuremberg trials. He also has a most original vision of history as well as a playful sense of playwriting. On the strength of *Mary Stuart*, translators and directors might quickly look to his other works.

Mr Hildesheimer should be grateful to the Dodger Theater's production of *Mary Stuart* at the Public Theatre. The Dodger Theatre group is one of the few New York theatre companies that has a feeling for...
ensemble playing, plus a depth of variety in its character actors. The playwright should also be grateful in having Roberta Maxwell as Mary, in a performance that puts her in the forefront of New York actresses.

Here Mary is the lady in waiting — for her own execution. The play starts slowly in Mary's dungeon cell and for quite a time it seems we're watching a rather tedious historical drama about a queen and her executioners. Then members of the royal household trickle in, the Queen drinks a potion, suddenly the action is speeded up and a flurry of sordid activities is telescoped into the next hour. As the queen is dressed for her execution, mayhem breaks loose. There's ratecatching, robbery, singing, several forms of fornication, a parade of stuffed dogs, religious conversion, murder, an Anglican prayer of damnation, and finally the execution.

Several of the New York critics labelled the play 'absurdist' (a catch-all tag if ever I heard one). Actually the play is totally logical, within its framework of telescoped time and heightened reality. It is a capsule of human nastiness and you feel almost guilty for laughing at so much of it.

And in the midst of all these disconcerting dirty deeds, there's Mary who as she is ritually dressed as Queen, becomes one before our eyes. As if by an act of Royal Will, Roberta Maxwell keeps the play focussed on her, even while the wildest distractions are happening on every side. And she even suggests pathos in the play's final moments. A remarkably skilful performance. After Ashes and Stevie and now Mary Stuart, Roberta Maxwell can go right to the top of the class.

With Lolita, Edward Albee's dramatisation of the Nabokov novel, it is we who have done the waiting. While feminists campaigned and the producer faced money problems, the opening night receded into the future. (The real reason, it is said, was Albee's consistent revisions of the second act.)

Sad to report, then, that after all that effort with Act II, Albee still couldn't get it right. What is wrong with the play is what will always be wrong with trying to squeeze a complex and multi-levelled novel into a two-hour traffic of the stage.

Oddly unimportant, Albee's Lolita has made a brave attempt to be like Nabokov's Lolita — all things to all people — but there just isn't time in the two hours' traffic of the stage.

One Albee device is to have Nabokov as narrator (coyly called 'A Certain Gentleman'). This allows Humbert someone to talk to about his inner desires, but as the Readers Digest version takes over in the second act, our Certain Gentleman almost gets the gate. As this is Ian Richardson, one of the English-speaking world's better actors, it's discouraging to see him cooling his heels on the sidelines waiting for another opportunity to get a word in. Donald Sutherland is Humbert Humbert and if he isn't quite the European gentleman everyone says he is, he does have flair, presence and a nice line in ironic passion.

Lolita is Blanche Baker, a 24 year old actress who can look like a teenager, but always acts like a grown up and clever actress. A tricky part and she handles it with a firmness that removes a lot of the awkwardness inherent in the material. Clive Revill is also on hand as Claire Quilty, but the part is reduced practically to cameo bits that then seem overacted. No doubt there's a lot of talent associated with Lolita. It seems, however, as if nobody has learnt that a great novel cannot be beaten to pulp.

As well as these listed ladies, on Broadway there are two new English imports: Jane Lapotere as Piaf and Glenda Jackson as Rose. These are about to be joined by Lauren Bacall in the musical Woman of the Year (based on the old Hepburn-Tracy film). Finally, Elizabeth Taylor will be weighing in with The Little Foxes. Yes, definitely Ladies' Day at the Broadway ballpark. Perhaps the men should stay home and clean up their act.

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AUSTRALIAN CENTRE INTERNATIONAL THEATRE INSTITUTE

153 Dowling Street, Potts Point, NSW, 2011. Telephone: 3571200. Director: Marlis Thiersch. Secretary: Alison Lyssa.

19TH BIENNIAL STATUTORY ITI CONGRESS will be held in Madrid 30 May to 6 June, 1981 with the theme of "The Responsibility of Theatre towards Humanity: The ITI in the 80's". The Australian delegation will include Linda Aronson, Keith Bain, Catherine Clarkson, Frank Ford, Glenda Linscott, Ken Ross and Marlis Thiersch.

UNESCO CONSULTATION ROUND

UNESCO has forwarded a list of questions to be answered before 20th May to help their planning for 1984-1989. This is an important opportunity for all theatre people to influence the future work of UNESCO and of the ITI. Further information from the ITI Centre.

ASSITEJ CONGRESS

The 7th world congress of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People will be held in Lyon. The address of the secretariat of the congress is: Theatre des jenus annees, 23 rue de Bourgogne, 69009 Lyon, France. 13th to 20th June 1981.

JAPAN

There will be an exhibition of western theatres and a seminar on foreign drama. Tokyo. September 1981.

INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM ON NORTH AMERICAN THEATRE TRAINING AND CRITICISM

A series of colloquia are being organised to coincide with Offstage 81, the Toronto Theatre Festival, 14-23 May. First colloquium: 14-16 May, on Theatre Training in Canada, events based at York University. Second colloquium: 17-23 May, on North American Methods of Performance Training, sponsored by the Canadian ITI Centre. Third colloquium: 17-23 May, to focus primarily on Theatre Criticism: Problems, and Possible Solutions; intended for working theatre critics around the world as well as theatre editors. These events have been co-ordinated by the ITI's Permanent Study Committee on Theatre Training and Criticism.
Roadgames — exciting final scene

by Elizabeth Riddell

Roadgames is a truckie film that owes a good deal to several American versions of this genre, and to the work of Burt Reynolds and Clint Eastwood, although its star, the gifted Stacey Keach, has a style of its own. In fact it is a surprise, perhaps even a shock, to find the Keach of Fat City and Luther and Brewer McCloud, to name only three films in which he has exhibited the diversity of his talent, driving a load of pig carcasses from Melbourne to Perth in the company of a dog (which he supposes to be a dingo) and a hitchhiker in the person of Jamie Lee Curtis.

Keach, or Pat Quid ("the fact that I drive a truck doesn't mean I'm a truckdriver") is forced to use the somewhat elementary device of making long speeches to the dog, asleep in the passenger seat, in order to let the audience know what is happening. These explanations fill in, or at least cover over, enormous holes in the structure of the plot. Pat also soliloquises while at the wheel rather more than seems probable, building up a picture of himself as loner, philosopher, gypsy and king of the road. Jamie Lee Curtis, or Pamela, or Hitch as Pat prefers to call her, also fancies herself as some of the above. She is a bored Canberra girl, daughter of an American diplomat, on the run from monotony.

Pat picks up Pamela, strictly against truckie rules, because he believes there is a Jack the Ripper on the road, tooling along in a green panel van. The police word is out about missing maidens on the Nullarbor, and the man in the van becomes Pat's prime suspect, especially after he is spotted with a shovel bigger than himself digging a hole just off the track in which to bury something — a body, or a bit of a body, as the killer is thought to chop up his victims, distributing the parts quite widely. Pat tries to alert the police at a corner store but the nasty locals play the juke box so loudly he can't make himself heard in whatever police station to which he gets connected. He could, of course, have used his two way truck radio, but that would have been too easy, and forfeited a scene in which everybody looks sinister and behaves in a menacing manner.

So off he goes on the road again, barrelling along after the van, sharing a stick of celery with Pam/Hitch, and a sausage with Boswell the dog (cute name) until confrontation in Perth.

In the meantime there have been some good road stunts — a car with attached cruiser is forced off the road because the driver was cheeky, the police question Pat while Pam hides behind the truck cabin, Boswell is slightly wounded by a billiard room cowboy, Pat attempts to ride somebody else's motor bike and runs it into a wall.

The Perth confrontation is a kind of reverse of the standard car chase: the van lures the enormous truck, which in turn is being followed by a police car, into ever narrower streets. The grinding pace gets slower, the truck's sides scraping against bricks while bits of it are sheared off. Finally it becomes stuck fast, in preparation for what is a truly exciting final scene.

Roadgames has been quite a long time on the hob. Its two American principals are supported by a competent cast of Australians from whom not much is asked — Marion Edward, Bill Stacey and Alan Hoppood among others. The producer/director is Richard Franklin who made Patrick and The Blue Lagoon; the screenplay is by Everett de Roche; the director of photography is Edward Monton and the stunt co-ordinator, who deserves a mention, is Grant Page, who also plays the nasty man in the van. The truck stunt driver was Heath Harris.

One of the film's disappointments is that the Nullarbor looks not especially vast, nor very interesting. But the producers can't be blamed for that.

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ST MARTINS YOUTH ARTS CENTRE

The Maribyrnong Theatre of Australia

NORMAN LINDSAY'S

The Magic Pudding

"THIS IS ENTHRALLING CHILDREN'S THEATRE"... THE AUSTRALIAN

THEATRE AUSTRALIA MAY 1981 37
I think it was Agnes de Mille who mentioned in her memoirs the particular difficulties and agonies of having to be a choreographer of standing, vacant of mind in front of a group of dancers with their "patient, drawn faces" who are waiting for their leader to be creative... in union time.

For most of us the idea and the image are enough but Graeme Murphy in his newest full length work An Evening chooses to theatricalise the idea as a connecting thread within the triptych form of the ballet as a whole. He places his dancers down in a hermetic and clean expanse of stage (how nice to see a Kristian Frederickson set without all the usual frills and curlicues) behind a front curtain that, as it rises, suggests by a simple optical illusion, the idea of the depth of the creative imagination, out of which thoughts and concepts come whirling as if from a vortex.

The dancers are covered in black cloth and they huddle around and entangle the choreographer (ie Mr Murphy) within their folds to the flat equivocal sonorities of Charles Ives' "The Unanswered Question". It's a corny idea for a prelude because I've a feeling that Murphy is drawn to the possibilities inherent in the music's title rather than any illumination of it or of his particular creative angst. As an opener it works well enough, but becomes downright repetitive and redundant when elaborated on later in the evening, becoming a sort of continuing sight gag, obsessive about those ideas being manhandled into shape and finally given birth.

It works only as far as hanging the piece together, and as such is as good as any other idea. For this is what An Evening needs if it is not to subside into the shape of a triple bill inexplicably shoe horned in together.

The work continues the form of a linear, cumulative non-narrative that was first experimented with in Rumours; it goes no further in developing the form but exists merely to call the piece a full evening work, a redundant title but one that Australian audiences, we're told, feel more comfortable and cozy with.

For some reason Murphy has decided on playing the three panels continuously without a break. The whole "evening" works out to about 90 minutes, and what with the wrenching gear changes (of focus, concentration and interpretation) for the audience, necessitated by the work's form and progress, and the myriad array of the material, one leaves the theatre somewhat shell-shocked and woozy from the onslaught.

Perhaps Murphy intended the audience to get some sort of overview of dance from presenting it thus, but the concert, and it is one, breaks down because the array remains too diffuse and cluttered. It is a problem of structure, which, if no rigorous blue pencilling is going to be done, could be alleviated by having a short interval between each piece. Far from letting the work lapse into the "triple bill syndrome" this would allow the audience time to collect their thoughts and judge each piece on its own merits.

As it was, at all the performances I attended, Part 3, which has the best dancing in it, was greeted with glum indifference and barely stifled yawns. The audience had loved the "fun", show-dancing Part 2 and was almost hysterical with anticipation. Like most hysterics, they wanted more of the same or a slap in the face. What they got was a quiet.
arching, ruminative expanse of slowly unfolding dance pulses and they chose not to enter deeply into it.

In Part 1, after a twee solo for girl and "devouring" studio mirror and a pat scene of "class and rehearsal" we swam into a diaphanous cloud of classical romantic dreaminess. In the above-mentioned interviews Murphy spoke of Part I being a sort of homage to George Balanchine, the acknowledged master of classical ballet in this century; in fact many of those in the audience who know their dance onions had a great time playing "spot the crib." There was the famous "hands upraised-warding-off-the-sun" gesture from the opening of Serenade, the Poet-in-a-forest-of-Muses from Emeralds and the pas de deux was more than reminiscent of Chaconne and if it comes to that, the creative struggles interludes had more than a nod at Ivesiana.

But it was what Murphy intended, a respectful homage to Balanchine's style, if a little bald at times, and there is a lot to be said lor emulating such a style so skillfully, rather than getting caught in a total "newness" that only swallows its own tail.

The pas de deux is the best part of it, with some lovely lifts and partnerings that aren't contrived or forced and the second female ensemble entry, with a soloist spotlighted as a foil in the Balanchine manner is a wide winging moment of arching arabesques and precise, lithe footwork that rolls and weaves within itself like the sea. The favourite Balanchine touches like the garlands, "turnstiles" and chains are touched with a deft Murphy signature that keeps them unique, like a tang of lemon where you'd expect honey.

Part 2 is the least successful part of the work, not because of any snobbery on my part toward "show dancing", far from it, but because it basks more in an empty theatricality than in a presentation of what constitutes "show" dancing.

The situation is that old backstage musical standby, the young dancer being selected by the choreographer and made the leading lady much to the chagrin of another leading lady (in this case the singer-dancer Geraldine Turner). Whatouches this rather thin theme is a jolly mess of tap-dancing chorines, backstage "mystique", Astaire Rogers lurches and glides, Chorus Line attitudinizing and a general rosebud-mouthed cuteness.

Murphy has taken the blueprint of this particular dance style and simply rehashed it, the choreographic interest falters because there's a curious warmed-over feeling about it that relinquishes any analysis of genre and gesture.

The company puts a lot into it, without rousing interest in what they're doing and finally prove to us that the more sterile the means of expression (and it does remain sterile here) the more compulsive the effort to create interest. It is all so gamin, so propulsive and effusive without any subtlety or substance that it's like getting a love letter from an illiterate, all in capitals.

Part 3 contains the best choreography and the greatest interest of the whole work. It succeeds everywhere, for the same reasons that Part 2 doesn't. It could be perhaps because Murphy feels more at home in the style, it being quintessentially the style that he has distilled for himself over the years. It could be because he is no longer burdened with having to illustrate or present a mannerism. Whatever the reason, the emphatic tread of this section of the ballet grows and expands on the stage and in the mind where the others existed in a bubble.

Eventually the choreography defers to the music, expounding it rather than walking side by side. The duet for Murphy and Vernon especially is too much of a "mickey mouse" in its restless, insect-like convulsions to the jagged dotted, pittance sequences of the quartet, reminiscent of the prelude to Stravinsky's Requiem Canticles.

Perhaps it is the connotations in the music (a friend of Meale's died during its creation and it is suitably elegaic) that drew Murphy to it as being so exact for his idea of the autumnal years of a dancer's predicament. It is a long quartet, and Murphy has put material so dense into it, without offering any self-conscious fireworks of any sort, that it is no wonder that the audience, reeling from the first two parts and overly conscious of the awful Opera House seats, felt restive.

But this is choreography, rich, unforced and potent arising from an emotional need. Sometimes the placid, phlegmatic surface is ruffled by an outburst that threatens to disrupt its flow, as if it were a last spasm of defiance against failing ability and means, but it is all caught up in the march of the ballet's logic. The final movement offers tranquil, impassive, dancing, so liquid and natural that the stage image is as great, blank and inevitable as fate itself.

One by one the dancers dance almost courtely, wheeling duets and solos that wrap themselves up fold upon fold into the final image of lone individuals reduced to one of the first and last basics of human movement, walking. It could have been sentimental, it could have been a cop out, but the ballet has built so inexorably to that image that we see that walking not as a termination but a germinate.
The Australian Opera moved to Canberra early in March with Verdi's 12th and 16th operas, *I Masnadieri* and *Rigoletto*. After a short season the company bifurcated, *La Traviata* joining *I Masnadieri* in Adelaide for another Verdi double-header, and Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* sharing the Brisbane season with *Rigoletto*.

While neither cast in Canberra was star-studded in the manner that Sydney at least is coming to expect, the company showed that it is strong in vocal talent; the cries of former years that the provinces hear second-rate casts can no longer be sustained. The general level of singing was stronger than, say, English National Opera in London, let alone in Leeds.

Despite the quality of what was on offer, the Canberra Theatre was less than full for the opening of the season. *I Masnadieri* was to be tackled for the first time by Joan Sutherland's recent Otello, Angelo Marenzi, who had agreed to learn the part following the announcement of Donald Smith's sudden retirement. Soprano Ailene Fischer was the new Amalia, while Robert Allman and Clifford Grant recreated the other principal roles that they had first assumed last year in Sydney with Smith (later Paul Ferris) and Sutherland.

While changes in cast greatly affected the impact of this little-known opera, it was in the pit that the true difference became apparent. Carlo Felice Cillario drew from the Elizabethan Melbourne Orchestra the best playing I have heard in opera this year. David Kram could not equal its tonal quality or emotional sweep in *Rigoletto*, a better and more familiar score, while the Elizabethan Sydney orchestra under Richard Bonynge had failed to excite when it introduced us to this score last year.

The eponymous robbers or bandits of *I Masnadieri* begin the opera as a sociable group of university students drinking in a tavern. They might be siblings of the lads from *Faust* or *The Tales of Hoffmann*. The introverted tenor (Marenzi) has been reading Plutarch when he receives bad news from home. His sudden resolve to turn desperado is thus explained; we may conjecture that wine made from sour grapes propelled his companions to follow him outside the tavern and the law.

If that seems unpromising, it merely begins one of the most anti-dramatic first acts ever set to music by a major composer. Scene two introduces the tenor's bad brother, the baritone. He is so unrelieved in evil that even Robert Allman, the country's most able stage villain, could not convince me either in Sydney or in Canberra that he believed much of it. In the third scene the soprano and her ancient basso guardian actually appear together, but theirs is a secondary relationship, that of mere deuteragonists as the tenor's classical authors might have said. The brothers, in whose conflict the dramatic tension resides, are kept apart all night. By the first act curtain we have been thoroughly sung to, but we might just as well have been watching an elaborately costumed concert.

The national company initially met the challenge by pairing its most exciting voices, Sutherland and Smith. Without Raymond Myers and Rhonda Bruce in *Rigoletto* by Verdi.
either the piece actually gains in credibility, Marenzi being younger and taller than Smith, and Ailene Fischer investing the role of Amalia with a touching vulnerability. Like many big operatic voices hers sounds less well focused in soft passages than when opened out. Marenzi continues to impress in the upper register; he was occasionally less than assured lower in his range on opening night.

This problem child of an opera, which caused the company box-office pain both in Canberra and Adelaide, is well served in this production. Designers Lees and Stennert, spectacularly successful in the current Rigoletto, which they first created in the early 1970s, fare variously here. One's first impression of the tavern is that Allan Lees is beneath his best form. After nine scenes have unfolded with a minimum of wasted time, one grants him more respect. On the other hand, the most memorable aspect of Michael Stennert's costume design is a sort of mad-batterdom, the whole brigand troupe being crowned with extravagant headdress.

The men of the chorus sang so much more consistently in Rigoletto that one wonders how much their standard was influenced by familiarity. Certainly, familiarity is a major criterion by which audiences can judge the soloists in Rigoletto, where the tunes are as instantly recognisable as any in opera. The final Canberra performance, which was the one I heard, was not an evening of constantly applauded arias, adequately sung though not as beautiful as it once was, with hitherto musically encased soloists in Italian opera, ensuring emotional sterility during ensembles.

Raymond Myers ought to be a superb Rigoletto, padding about the stage, a small figure among the great, anything but comely, with huge, frightened eyes. His voice, though not as beautiful as it once was, is still serviceable. But his is an altogether planned tragic figure whose every moment and gesture looks rehearsed. The singer seems to be outside the character, uninvolved with it. One thinks of the contrast with Donald Smith's demented clown, Canio, in I Pagliacci.

The original censorship problems with Rigoletto sprang from the portrayal of the Duke as libertine. Reginald Byers, like most tenors who sing this role, seemed more intent on floating a seductive vocal line than radiating sex appeal. He was never about to surmount the difficulties of the part with a triumphal flourish, but he was coping well when he unaccountably lost confidence for the whole of the aria "La Donna e Mobile", with predictable result. Rhonda Bruce was warm of voice and innocent of bearing as Gilda. It was simply the best of the major performances, a worthy successor to the superb Carden in the same role.

In the smaller roles the company showed an important aspect of its strength. Donald Shanks was a giant Sparafucile, capable of dispatching a victim by cuffing or squeezing, without need of a weapon. And that cavernous voice! As Maddalena, Lesley Stender matched an opulent contralto with ample physical charms. In I Masnadieri Bruce Martin and Lamberto Furlan had also shown the immense advantage that a principal artist's voice brings to a minor role.

After having blamed Verdi and Boito in March for the fact that Shakespeare's Desdemona is still able to give tongue after being smothered (the incongruity seems far greater in the opera) I return to the subject of singing corpses. Having been stabbed, tied in a sack, and given by the villain Sparafucile to Rigoletto, Gilda manages a conversation with her father before expiring.

H.M.S. Pinafore

The State Opera's decision to start 1981 with a production of H.M.S. Pinafore was not one of its happiest ideas. For a start, they were contending with the recollection of the Australian Opera's witty, sparkling and energetic version of Patience; and secondly, there seemed no strong reason, on the evidence of this production, for resurrecting the designs of the earlier version, done here by Adrian Slack, with Edward Woodward as Sir Joseph Porter.

Admittedly, this production had one strong plus — the person of Dennis Olsen in the role in which Woodward had appeared so pallid previously. It has become a cliche to draw attention to Olsen's unique abilities in Gilbert and Sullivan, nevertheless, it still deserves to be re-emphasised. There was, quite simply, no comparison between his light-footed, snappy and energetic reading of the role and Woodward's limp performance earlier. And it simply will not do to imply, as has occasionally been done, that the deployment of his talents in Gilbert and Sullivan is somehow not worthy of serious attention: any performer with his skills, deftness, wit and physical grace would be worth watching, even if he were singing a patter song consisting of entries in a telephone directory.

I wish I could be more enthusiastic about his debut as a Gilbert and Sullivan director. For much of the sparkle and vitality that characterised his own performance was noticeably lacking in the production as a whole. There were some marvellous touches — above all, a riotous series of reprises of "Never Mind the Why and Wherefore", which included an appearance by Olsen in Superman cape and attire. But elsewhere, the production, though neat and clear, was, frankly, rather dull.

Some of this was undoubtedly attributable to Denis Vaughan's uninspired approach to the music. All the notes were there, in their right place, but there was precious little music and even less sense of Gilbert and Sullivan's style. It is all very well to take Gilbert and Sullivan seriously; but seriousness of intent is not the same as sureness of touch or lightness of hand. The music plodded where it should have tripped, meandered where it should have been directed towards goals. It simply lacked rhythmic vitality.

The singers coped well for the most part: Thomas Edmonds was reliable as Ralph Rackstraw and Roger Howells contributed an alert and energetic Captain Corcoran, as well as a rich and rapid transformation to Able Seaman at the end. The chorus work was accurate without being inspiring — a comment which, overall, applies to the entire production.
The role of women

CANBERRA ROUND-UP

by Janet Healey

It could be said that one of the indices of a community's dramatic vitality is the amount of activity on the fringes of the established theatrical scene. In Canberra during March we had the curious situation of a plethora of lunch-time theatre rushing in to fill the vacuum created by the absence of full-scale local productions.

Chekhov's short plays, which put me in mind of working sketches for his large treatments of human frailty and vulnerability, are a natural choice for this time-slot, offering just the right blend of serious comment generously leavened with comedy. We had no fewer than three versions of The Proposal (one of which I missed) and a production of The Bear. John Paisley's Proposal at the ANU Arts Centre was first cab off the rank, and set a spanking pace.

In this play the thin skin of late nineteenth century romanticism bulges with the conflict of three self-seeking personalities, and much of the comic impact depends on the resulting surface tension. Paisley's economical production, stark against huge black drapes, achieved this precise balance admirably, being played for all the laughs it could get without degenerating into farce, and avoiding po-faced social comment. John Cuffe's ageing hypochondriac bachelor was especially fine, but in such a performance comparisons are odious.

Repertory's production failed to emulate this high standard. It was far more elaborate in stage dressing and costume but less convincing in production and casting. Laughter was the primary aim, and the play suffered in the process. I suspect that each player had hit upon a comic mannerism to encapsulate the role, but Chekhov, even in these small plays, eludes so easy a taxonomy.

Sandwiched between these two productions were seasons of J M Barrie's Rosalind (Repertory) and Oscar Straus's adaptation of Arms and the Man, The Chocolate Soldier (Canberra Opera). Barrie's little play reflects his obsession with the problem of ageing - a variation on Peter Pan, one might say. The middle-aged heroine is as young or as old as she chooses to be and as her audiences, both on and off stage, see her. At the watershed between youth and middle age myself, I sympathised with her schizophrenic, but was ultimately unconvinced by the vaudeville quick-change from comfortable middle-aged spread to springing youth.

The Chocolate Soldier raised just one question: why bother? Shaw's play, with all its verbosity, makes the point much more tellingly than does the repetitive honkety-ponky of this justly almost forgotten musical. Despite the unscripted aid of a pneumatic drill outside the theatre, which lent some verisimilitude to the off-stage battle, the battle on-stage between virtually meaningless material and some not inconsiderable talent was lost before the curtain went up.

The March "sandwich theatre season" concluded with another Chekhov play, The Bear, in the foyer of the Canberra Theatre. Here again, producer John Paisley demonstrated a natural affinity with Chekhov in his understanding of the critical tension between role playing and reality. Margaret de Mestre as Ivanovna gave us a touching blend of hauteur and vulnerability and John Cuffe as Smirnov was bear-like enough for anybody, smashing the furniture and alternating between rage and self-pity with an unerring sense of timing.

If one were seeking a common thread in these productions, such might well be found in the subliminal theme of the role of women, not in the crude twentieth century fashion but in the more realistic sense in which women have always controlled and manipulated men. Shopfront Theatre, on its way to the Australian Drama Festival in Adelaide, brought us two short plays written and directed by Errol Bray, author of the controversial The Choir which made such an impact at the 1980 Playwrights' Conference. Without Women and The Fittest explore in very different ways the theme of the woman who lurks inside even the most masculine of men.

"I love the woman inside me" is the affirmation of Without Women, a short piece - not yet a play - in which two young male actors putting together a show about women discover their internal feminine dimensions. Much of the piece consists of readings from male authors who wrote with authority and insight about women. Apart from a perhaps deliberate lack of structure, the main failing was vocal inadequacy: Nick Carlile and Gerry Tacovsky are not yet expert enough to read O'Neill, let alone Shakespeare, with the necessary clarity and flowing line.

The Fittest, by contrast, is a fully developed play about survival in poverty, unemployment and high-rise violence, counterpointed by the working through of a homosexual relationship in which the survivor becomes the victim. Carlile and Tacovsky were more successful here, perhaps because the diction of the play is closer to their own natural style. The woman inside the man is an object of hatred rather than love, and I found the play unrelentingly grim and pessimistic. The Fittest demonstrated again that Bray is fundamentally an ideas man, and that his plays are thesis plays: he is groping for a style which will frame a philosophical statement in naturalistic medium. I feel confident that he will eventually find it.
I think it was the actors’ failure to grasp the pattern that disturbed the rhythms of the play. Cathy Downes, Barry Otto and Deidre Rubenstein as Natalya played at a high level of exposed emotion against which the rest of the cast at times seemed curiously flat. John Bell’s Vershinin had a touching self-deprecatory wit but little suppressed sexuality to match Downes’ Masha. Anna Volska and Michele Fawdon, as Olga and Irina, seemed to have a block between their comprehension and execution; Ivar Kants’ Solony was oddly wholesome for a revengeful paranoid; and John Allen as Andrey seemed defeated before the action begins.

The production deserves to impress more and will improve with performance. With all these reservations I recommend it to you.

Hamlet gives us a young star in Colin Friels who, at 28, has already impressed with a wide range of work for the State Theatre Company of SA, Nimrod and the Sydney Theatre Company. He is clearly an actor whose life is on stage; to see him is to remember him.

I can see why the STC chose him to play Hamlet, and he rises splendidly to the challenge. He is good looking, athletic and handles the verse with an ease not shared by some more experienced actors. From first-night nerves, but I was too conscious of the preparation behind each character. It was not until the last act that I felt the play soar. The parting of Masha and Vershinin was worth waiting for.

Michele Fawdon (Irina), Cathy Downes (Masha) and Anna Volska (Olga) in Nimrod’s Three Sisters.

Photo: Branco Galica.

Sydney was treated this month to the opening of two major classics in one week. Both are played in their entirety (Three Sisters 3½ hours, Hamlet four hours) and both productions concentrate on bringing the works nearer to our time.

Aubrey Mellor’s Three Sisters, for which he has prepared with Ludmilla Natalenko a free-flowing, modern translation, is admirably lucid and had some revelations for me about the text, including the meaning of the Pushkin poem going round in Masha’s brain. Kim Carpenter’s designs are simple and authoritative; there are some stunning performances, notably from Cathy Downes as Masha, Barry Otto as Kulygin and Drew Forsythe as Tusenbach.

It is a production made with love and I wish I could say that it moved me more. Perhaps the cast had first-night nerves, but I was too conscious of the preparation behind each character. It was not until the last act that I felt the play soar. The parting of Masha and Vershinin was worth waiting for.

THEATRE AUSTRALIA MAY 1981 43
GHOST AND THE PLAYER KING, AND NONI

A gift of a part to him. John Gaden as the
were sadly miscast. Star of the show, after
Cotterill as the first gravedigger came as a
play. But it was a long evening.

In the first place he sets the play late
Victorian, a period which conjures up the
Gothic horror, claustrophobic decoration,
modish melancholy, colonialism, Jack the
Ripper — and, of course, Freud. It would
seem to me impossible to avoid a Freudian
interpretation of the play if you choose this
period. And all those elements are admirable grist to Hamlet.

But Hayden Griffin’s sets defeat this idea
at once. Bare concrete caissons moved
mechanically and lit by white light provide
an intrusive and sterile background. The
worst intrusion is the abrupt appearance of
images of John Gaden and Max
Cullen for the closet scene. I lost most of
the dialogue wondering how they felt
about being compared to Hyperion and a
satyr, feature by feature. Again and again
I found myself distracted from the text by
inconsistencies and absurdities.

Friels is as out of joint with the murky
emotions of the period as was the production. Worse, some of the actors
were wildly miscast. Star of the show, after
Friels, was Alexander Hay as Polonius
— a gift of a part to him. John Gaden as the
Ghost and the Player King came as a
breath of relief to the third section of the
play. But it was a long evening.

Gaskill’s Hamlet has all the faults of his
Love’s Labours Lost at the same theatre,
and none of the virtues of his productions
on home ground. Many of the actors reveal
their unfamiliarity with Shakespeare’s
verse without adding positive skills of their
own. The most curious lack is any structure
of authority — essential to the perfor­
mance of Shakespeare even if you
choose to ignore it. Central to this problem
is Max Cullen, totally at sea as Claudius.
Both the verse and the position of political
power are outside his grasp. But the
problem pervades the court — Gertrude,
Laertes, Horatio and finally Hamlet
himself.

Friels’ performance is not to be
minimised and we shall see a great
performance from him — perhaps in ten
years time. But the production militates
against success by conveying a Hamlet
simply bewildered, who never discovers, as
the three sisters do, what his place is in the
tragedy of this world.

CONFUSED ISSUES

THE WARHORSE

by Anthony Barclay

The Warhorse by John Upton. The ‘Q’ Theatre,
Penrith, NSW. Opened Friday 20th March, 1981
Director. Richard Brooks; Designer. Arthur Dicks;
Stage Manager. Pauline Beville-Anderson; Lighting
and sound. Ian Young-Landell.
Cast. Jack Armstrong, Ben Gabriel; Josie Armstrong,
Jessica Nodd. Ada Cave, June Collins; Rowley Brown.
Kevin Jackson; George Carpenter. Rob Thomas;
David Harrow, Craig Ashley.
(Professional)

The Crucible by Arthur Miller. First Stage Theatre
Company at the Cell Block Theatre, East Sydney
(Professional)

Richard Brooks’ production of John
Upton’s The Warhorse is quite the best
thing I’ve seen at the ‘Q’ for some time. It’s
not the kind of play to set the world on fire
but the production is honest, restrained
and accurately paced. Arthur Dicks’ set is a
simple, uncluttered and tasteful living room;
the back flats are painted a
Southern Cross that is wonderfully sky
blue. The effect is to merge easily with the
various political parade that passes
through. But, above all, it is the acting that
is exemplary: swift, alert, concentrated.

Indeed the acting was remarkably good
given the overall scope of the play. There
is something finally unsatisfying about The
Warhorse in much the same way that Bob
Herbert’s No Names... No Pack Drill
leaves one slightly cold. Both writers get
considerable mileage out of their res­
pective subjects: in Upton’s case it is the
spectrum of political behaviour set within
the context of local and State issues. More
specifically, it is the ALP and the outer
Western suburbs of Sydney. There are
many moments when Upton isolates the
political animal in all its glory: in absurd
trivia (should the local chooks be
licensed?) in mildly explosive comedy
(what to do with some forty hectares of
land bought for impounding unlicensed
chooks, no less... could the ALP strike an
‘honest’ deal with Colonel Sanders???) in
the daily bread and butter (when the group
agree for various reasons and with varying
degrees of guilt or satisfaction that the
political career of one Ada Cave must
cease). Upton, like Herbert, is writing from
closely observed experience and, again like
Herbert, much of this is done with flair,
humour and some degree of compassion.

But when one steps back from the
interesting moments to look at the whole
one notes that both writers’ works tend to
raise issues with which neither is prepared
to come to terms. A well rounded play may
well imply certain issues that do not lend
themselves to well rounded resolutions.
Both writers come close to cloying
sentimentality.

In The Warhorse the play’s sympathies
fall squarely though not simplistically with
the elder politicians — Jack Armstrong
and Ada Cave. These are the older style
politicians and, at least in Jack’s case, the
more engaging characters. Maybe they are
more ‘likeable’ as people (maybe) but the
implicit sympathies: they earn from the
playwright get a little confused. We are
asked to accept and then to forgive and
forget but there’s no Fred Daly in this
piece. I guess it all boils down to one’s
definition of the word ‘political’ and in
Upton’s play it’s little more than people
who are incidentally involved in politics.
To hell with the issues when we are invited
to laugh them away. Upton does not
confront issues with the power of Sewell-
A glimpse into the past

**WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY?**

by Helen Musa

*Whose Life Is It Anyway?* by Gerald A Larue. 

Director. Brian Hewitt-Jones; Lighting. Walter Van Nieuwkuyk; Stage Manager. John Witham.

Cast: Ken Harrison, Robert Coleby; Sister Anderson, Dorothy Alison; Kay Sadler, Lenore Smith; John. Fred Steele; Dr Scott, Annette Andre, Dr Emerson. Keith Lee; Mrs Boyle, Elaine Lee; Philip Hill, Peter De Salis; Dr Travers, David Nettheim; Peter Kershaw. Philip Ross; Dr Barr. Earle Cross; Andrew Eden, David Foster; Mr Justice Millhouse, Don Pascoe.

(Professional)

For an evening of lack-lustre acting one could hardly do better than sit through the MLC Theatre Royal's production of *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* directed by Brian Hewitt-Jones. Billed as "a moving and quite thought-provoking play" (as well it might be in other hands), this production was actually a trip back into the dreary every sense. Vocally it's pitched at a level that gets the right laughs in the wrong place (so to speak) and it lacks movement and stagecraft. Too many lines are delivered with arms folded and feet planted firmly on the stage. This tended to give the work an inappropriate tableau effect and made flow and rhythm very awkward. The audience though seemed appreciative... so something of a step in the right direction.

Jessica Noad (Josie) and Ben Gabriel (Jack) in the Q's *The Warhorse*. Photo: Trevor Connell.
1960's of Australian commercial theatre — an experience devoid of any depth or emotion.

To look at the raw material of the play, one would expect it to have everything going for it: a script crackling with stylish if well-worn witticisms; a "daring" theme — the individual's right to make decisions about his own life and death (euthanasia?) dramatized through up-to-the-minute subject matter; a time-tested dramatic conflict between the rights of the individual and the inhumanity of public institutions.

A genuine and provokingly real presentation of the conflicts within the main characters would have done credit to the aims of International Year of the Disabled, especially as the main character is a paraplegic.

But what did we get? Blandly undistinguished "stage" English accents which most self-respecting Australian theatre companies have long since rejected. Television actors chosen briefly for their external attractiveness. Settings more appropriate to The Young Doctors than a serious stage play.

The play is full of unrewarding supporting roles, stereotyped to a fault no doubt to give fuller scope to the main character of Ken Harrison. But it was hard to see why the actors put so little effort into those roles. Annette Andre, the glamorous lady-doctor who didn't even know how to hold a stethoscope, looked like a secretary. Her "understanding" tone of voice was so neutral as to suggest icy indifference even more than "heart of steel" Nurse Anderson. Elaine Lee made a notably listless fist of the insufferable social worker. Indeed only Lenore Smith as the ingenious Nurse Sadler seemed to bring any freshness to her role.

This general feeling of indifference and irrelevance was enhanced by the set, whose designer was mysteriously if understandably omitted from the main credits. Indeed the set seemed in its tediously tasteful symmetry straight from the drawing board. No doubt it was intended to symbolize the clinical precision of modern hospital life, but its theatrical effect was to render all entrances and exits utterly predictable. The attractive circle-eye view of the set quickly gave way to the boredom which a symmetrical set forces upon stage movement, especially with the bedridden hero situated dead centre of stage.

I will admit to certain reservations about this highly commercial property of a play. The most obvious drawback is the physical immobility of the central character, which places a greater burden than usual on all supporting actors, as well as on the internal qualities of the play. The playwright's apparently desperate resort to the court­room drama formula is another problem, but that at least is a theatrical cliche that comes off. Indeed things liven up considerably at the Theatre Royal when disabled Ken Harrison hires a lawyer to argue his right to die in peace.

But ultimately, the failure of this production is not attributable to the play but to the actors themselves — to their total failure to convince or move, surely the main criteria by which such a "important social content" can be judged. By sheer energy. Robert Coleby, playing the main character, managed to touch us at the moment when he finds the "hanging judge" who gives him his right to die, but it is a rare moment. Perhaps in the medium of television, where the director, the playwright and most of the cast would have been more at home, there would be alternatives to the visually static moments of the play and we would have more freely entered the world of Ken Morrison.

The fact is that it was impossible to believe for a moment that Robert Coleby was paralysed. Attractively lively in comparison with the dead wood around him, his very strength proved his downfall. The mannered archness of his witticisms hardly suggested the tortured self-satire of an intelligent man trapped in his own body. Even his pleasant physical fairness went against him from a visual point of view — it was very hard for a stage audience to detect much expressiveness in it from a distance. But there are many who will applaud him for his vitality and for the superhuman effort of remaining physically limp all evening.

There are many too who will overlook faults in this production because of its "important social content". But there are those like me who will remember the evening as a glimpse into the past — an example of what most Australian theatre now thankfully is not.

Brian Blain (Frank) and Des Davis (Saul) in Theatre South's Travelling North.

Low key handling

by Barry O'Connor

TRAVELLING NORTH


Director: Gordon Streek; Designer: William Pritchard; Lighting: Michael Morrell; Stage Managers, Michael Morrell, Judy Armstrong.

Cast: Frank, Brian Blain; Frances, Faye Montgomery; Saul, Des Davis; Helen, Katherine Thomson; Sophie, Sheelah Boleyn; Joan, Val Whitaker; Freddy, Geoffrey Morrell; Celebrant, Kent Wilson; Attendant, Connie Cowin; Announcer, Bill McGaw.

. . Travelling North has been given a low-key handling in this Theatre South production. The colours are muted with no significant contrast between the woolly greys of Melbourne and the washed out hues of the North. The acting verges on Bergmanesque intimacy — whether to give Williamson's realism its full due, or to avoid the tinny acoustics of the institutional auditorium, I don't know. It works for most characters but not all. Brian Blain's Frank is at a decided disadvantage: his quixotic elegance and powerful vocal resources better suit him to the nineteenth-century Covent Garden stage. However, Faye Montgomery's Frances manages to make the play her own. There wasn't a moment when she was out. Good support comes from Geoffrey Morrell's Freddy and Des Davis' Saul. With so many "cinematic" scenes necessitating so many transitional blackouts, the lighting has to be spot on and the scenes have to find their stride just as suddenly. This lively kind of punctuation and playing was sadly lacking.
Two very different examples of Aarne Neeme's direction have been seen in Newcastle in the last few weeks; the Hunter Valley Theatre Company opened its 1981 season with the musical A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum, and then played host to Neeme's production of Mary Barnes on the last leg of its national tour. In terms of achieving its aims, Forum turned out to be the more successful of the two.

One of the reasons for staging a popular musical in the enormous Civic Theatre was to ensure some kind of financial stability for the HVTC; while audience levels may not have been high enough to do this, they were certainly more than respectable, and audience members unequivocally enthusiastically. Although the piece has little to over-dramatised and romanticised the protagonist task of playing both Musical Director and MC Pseudolus, both of which roles he performed with unflagging energy, while David Wood complemented him well as Chief Slave Hysterium. Aarne Neeme has clearly also made good choices of the new core company members - John Doyle, an inspiredly comic Lycus and Jonathon Biggins, all singing, all dancing and all gangling as the love-sick adolescent Hero.

Neeme's fluid direction and ceaseless flow of comic routines, coupled with Jeannette Wood's inventive amusing and also attainable choreography, give life and humour to all but a few scenes, in what can easily be a fairly dismal musical.

As a complete contrast, Mary Barnes played out its intimate revelations of madness and sanity on the cramped stage of the Playhouse in un-airconditioned discomfort. The play relies wholly on an anticipated shock response to its subject matter, and indeed the discussion of schizophrenia and its treatment is one with much potential interest. The script, though, fails to reproduce dramatically the experience of mental breakdown, and the commitment and energy of the cast cannot compensate for this.

Mary Barnes was a thirty-five year old nurse and a severe schizophrenic when she went to live in an alternative therapeutic community set up by some radical psychiatrists. She was successfully treated over a period of years on a one-to-one basis, without electrotherapy or drugs by an American, known in the play as Eddie (Peter Carmody).

The semi-documentary account is written in the telegraphic style popular with English dramatists like Rudkin and Edgar in the early seventies; Neeme has chosen to play this style humourously, making two-dimensional caricatures of all the roles except Mary and Eddie. A true depiction of the all-important environment of the community is therefore lost, leaving the two central characters adrift in their emotions.

The portrayal of madness on stage always treads a fine line. The combination of this interior monologue style and the impassioned, exteriorised insanity of Natalie Bate's powerful performance often over-dramatised and romanticised the
condition without giving much insight into the state of mind, or the way of the path back to sanity.

The self-consciously significant delivery, replete with pauses, did nothing to quicken the pace of an overlong play, and if one came away exhausted it was more from witnessing the emotional input of the cast than from the stirring of any emotional depths in the audience.

**Precision and athleticism**

**WEST**

*by Adrian Wintle*


Director, Peter Barclay; Design, Anthony Babicci; Lighting design, Peter Barton; Costumes, Anita Gibbs; Music, Greg Kerr.

Cast: Henk Johannes, Justin Byrne, Steven Ford, Wayne Pigrant, Bob Baines, Ken Moffat, Debra May, Anthony Babicci, Peter Huime.

*West* extends and enriches Berkoff’s preoccupation with lower middle-class life in London as displayed in *East*, and Peter Barclay’s RTC world premiere of the play complemented grittily elegant writing with precise and glittering stage effect.

Ostensibly centring on a confrontation between rival street gangs in Hoxton and Stamford Hill, *West* offers sharp insights into the wry, violent, sad and escapist world of young people caught in London’s depressed suburbs, in which daytime tedium is made bearable by nightly exploits.

The play’s language is little short of breathtaking in its synthesis of rhythmic Shakespearian cadence and London vernacular. “Breathless, I was aghast when I saw standing between the full moon and the lamplight, this geyser/all armed, a certain aim he took/and felled the swarthy git from Hoxton with a deft and subtle chop/I never witnessed Mike I swear such venom and gross form in leather stacked”.

This quality of writing characterises the entire play, creating the problem of reconciling stage action with such potent dialogue.

Barclay’s direction inventively capitalised on balletic values to insinuate both grace and menace, his London cock-sparrow toughs achieving in physical terms what Berkoff achieves in the script: a fluidity that swivelled easily between innocent movement on the one hand and razored violence on the other.

The result was precision and athleticism in a play that is anecdotal rather than developmental and which glories in its descriptive language. Barclay also tilted a cornucopia of lighting and sound effects, rendering the fight sequences, an enactment of motorbike and rider and a portrayal of peak-hour tube travel especially telling in stage terms.

Henk Johannes as the Stamford Hill gang leader Mike brought a nice easy style to those areas of the play needing sly humour or brash suggestiveness, but lacked a measure of toughness. His opposite number Bob Baines scored in this respect, and of the other cast members Justin Byrne, Debra May (vivid as a London floozie) and Ken Moffat (doubling as a mobster and Mike’s mum) particularly stood out. Babicci’s stark and latticed set served the action well, and Greg Kerr’s Beethovenesque music gave a *Clockwork Orange* feel to the show.

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Justin Byrne (Les) and Henk Johannes (Mike) in RTC’s *West*. Photo: Peter Morris.
Plenty of sting

BLEEDIN' BUTTERFLIES

by Paul Cowdy

Bleedin' Butterflies by Doreen Clarke, Darwin Theatre Group, NT. Opened March 27, 1981.

Director, Robert Kimber.

Cast: May, Shayne Laybutt; Leo, Peter Fyfe; Nina, Dawn Ray; Jack, John Evans; Chris, Lesley Hastwell; Jimmy, Michael Glasson.

(Pro/Am)

"Up in Darwin — where everything bites but the butterflies." So, according to Bill Wannan, goes one Australian saying about life in this northern city, but the Darwin Theatre Group gave Doreen Clarke's Bleedin' Butterflies plenty of sting in their production of the play.

Anticipating a Melbourne Playbox Theatre production by two weeks, the Darwin troupe's performance was particularly praiseworthy since it introduced a virtually untried cast to local audiences. This decision put a special onus of responsibility on director, Robert Kimber, but he placed his faith in the cast, foregoing any attempt at technical gimmickry to add impact.

Kimber saw parallels between Clarke's lead player and that of Brecht's Mother Courage, opting for emotional honesty and from historical material in part provided by the author, studied with his cast the depression era in which the play takes place.

This gave costume and presentation a feel for the hard times which dominate the story. The hessian tent, sunbleached wood and riverside rocks of the set add to the bleak reality of life at the Canning Bridge campsite.

But the triumph of the production was the choice of Shayne Laybutt to take the lead role of May Sewell, the vulgar realist who Clarke allows to dominate the play from start to finish.

Physically suited to the part, conveying simultaneously the warmth of womanhood, and the hard truth of practical survival, the broadhipped Laybutt stomped through her role in masculine boots, crushing the sanctimonious and hypocritical about her.

Clarke, clearly concerned with the injustice of patriarchal society, and its female victims during hard times, gives the male roles that scope for development or for winning audience sympathy.

The exception is Jimmy Lamb, the retarded boy who is finally sacrificed by May to the broader interest. Jimmy is played by Michael Glasson who was fully aware of the danger of allowing Jimmy to be merely an embarrassing idiot, and successfully lead the audience along a tightrope in which balance was maintained between humour and affection before his final downfall.

At the same time, helped by May's robust commentary: "Probably stopped to play with himself when he saw what he'd got in his hand", Glasson conveyed all the raw sexuality essential to the role. It was the key performances of Laybutt and Glasson which lifted the performance from 'not bad' to 'good'.

Others in the cast were competent, and probably only needed to be that, since Clarke only writes them as foils to May and Jimmy. Kimber says he encouraged his troupe to underact to avoid melodrama - and that would be an easy trap for a less experienced director - but when May left the stage the rest did seem to flounder a little. As May's brutish husband, Leo, Peter Fyfe showed plenty of aggression but lacked the forcefulness of true male chauvinism.

John Evans, as Jack Broadbent, the mother's boy whose puritanical bent obscures both true charity and his own sexuality, didn't quite have the assertiveness of the righteous.

Jimmy's deserted mother, Nina, (Dawn Ray) looked properly prim in response to May's outrageousness, but failed to give the audience a sense of her rising hysteria, which was to lead to her suicide.

Chris, married to Broadbent out of the goodness of his heart, was too frail and virginal — after all she was a fugitive from the police, pregnant, and finally one of the few survivors — as played by Lesley Hastwell.

But all these criticisms must be tempered by the knowledge that the cast was new, overshadowed by an excellent May and given few lines with which to express themselves by Clarke.

There is no doubt that the Group has found new talent, though some will need development.

Shayne Laybutt (May) in DTG's Bleedin' Butterflies.
Taking up the challenge

OUT OF WORK, OUT OF MIND
CROOK SHOP
COLONIAL EXPERIENCE

by Veronica Kelly


Director, Doug Anderson; Design, Bob Daly, Bruce Wolf.

Cast: Michael Cummings, Julie Hickson, Ken MacLeod, Lynne Samson. (Professional)


Director, Eileen Beaton; Designer, David Bell. (Professional)

If the community were always to get as much value for its subsidy dollar in terms of intelligent engagement with community issues and sparkling, inventive theatre as the Popular Theatre Troupe regularly delivers, I’m sure Australian theatre would be well into its Periclean Age. In this case the dollars are provided chiefly by the Australia Council, as the Troupe receives no subsidy from the State whose scattered communities it serves so well. A programme of two recent plays, caught during a brief return to base in the course of the Troupe’s tireless touring, provided an instructive overview of the development in their recent work. The Troupe have never in their history and ideology of work and unemployment, placing the current crisis in relation to long term developments in European and Australian capitalist history. As is usual in the Troupe’s work, the show is jam packed with clearly formulated and structured information which explains, as well as comments on, complex and difficult issues. Near the show’s end the implications of this strategy make themselves clear, when the lived realities of the thirties depression are conveyed through the song “The Sandy Hollow Line”, given a moving delivery which leaves the audience weak-kneed through its sheer power and anger. An arresting piece of theatre, beautifully judged and beautifully honest.

The newest show, Crook Shop, described as a documentary satire on the relationship between law and justice, uses material provided by the 1977 Lucas Report into Criminal Law Enforcement in Queensland. The show makes its disturbingly large point through the metaphor of popular-imagery cop operas, subverting their implicit assumptions about the innocuous “normality” of the activities of state-protected law enforcers. As befits the form, Crook Shop has a narrative build-up and climax, with a savagely bland post-script which kicks the issues into the laps of the community at large. Incidentally, it includes the best Joh impersonation I’ve yet seen — but because the easily imitable tics are wittily structured to dissect the “Leader’s” trusty issue-evading and media-fanning interview techniques.

The show seems already to have exposed the explosively contradictory position of theatre which seriously addresses itself to the community. The Queensland Department of Education, subsequent to some well placed phone calls, has banned its performance in State Schools, and plain clothes detectives have honoured performances with their presence. As the Troupe orbits its tough-minded and under-subsidised way around the country, it should not be missed. The issues are too important. The Troupe’s engagement tests out the front lines of those political and contractual arrangements in Australia which dictate what can and cannot be said and done: by whom, to whom, and in what forums, and, most pertinently, under what public sponsorship or protection.

Walter Cooper’s Colonial Experience at La Boite is a fascinating review of our theatre’s origins, and the experience is a mixed delight. It’s exhilarating to be reminded of the solitude and confidence our playwriting once had, and depressing to remind oneself of how much of this tradition has had to be rediscovered after the J C Williamson colonialist blight covered the land like the rabbit plague, destroying the roots of the native growth and promoting its replacement by gaudy and tasteless exotics.

The colonial experience meted out to the play’s New Chums is of a double kind. The usual bruising initiation is dealt out at last by a brush brumby to the cockney Sam Sparkle; this character seems to be a double and substitute for the toffier Chum who gets the girl without having to sit the horse. Rather disappointingly, the play does not complete the transformation with an acclimatised Sparkle, all smoking, swearing and cabbage-tree hatted. The experience that matters is laid on by the play’s most vital creation, the Irishman “Captain” Versatile Fluent, a wonderful comic observation of an emergent native type grafted by the playwright on to the outline of the Restoration spark tradition. The role’s potential is seized upon and wonderfully realised by Graeme Johnston.

The generally crisply directed cast are a little too conscious of “playing comedy”: Style, as the PTT shows, is an organic, not an imposed, confrontation with the play’s material. Fine design by David Bell, whose visual sense and flair never disappoint. His setting shows off the genial colour and homogeneity of Colonial Experience, and helps re-establish its position as a fore-runner of Esson, Williamson and other observers and celebrators of our paradoxical social comedy.

Failure of metaphor

THE CHOIR


Director, Bryan Nason; Designer, David Bell; Choreography, Jack Webster; Lighting, Stage Manager, Paul Haseler. Casting: Paul, Patrick Reed; David, Michael McCaffrey; Colin, Geoff Carrwright; Garry, James Poster; Michael, Glenn Perry; Peter, Johnny Rush; Andrew, Malcolm Cork. (Professional)

Like Peter Shaffer’s Equus, The Choir is a cry for liberation of the spirit in the face of institutionalised conformity, a theatrical spasm of guilt at the dampered ardour and manacled creativity of the young. Bray’s equation of castration with spiritual brainwashing, an irreparable break in the show’s narrative, comes as a shock. The Choir is a good, solid musical, with a number of strong performances, but the overall effect is a little too tamed. The Choir is a play that is too complex for its own good, and the result is a somewhat disjointed production, with some excellent moments but little sense of a whole. The Choir is a play that is too complex for its own good, and the result is a somewhat disjointed production, with some excellent moments but little sense of a whole.
rational sense long after the emotions have recovered.

If the recent Nimrod production seems to suggest that somewhere between Canberra and Sydney Neil Armfield developed doubts about the play, Bryan Nason's production emerges as a complete act of faith in both its form and content. The TN Company's rendering is forceful and sensitively balanced, drawing superlative performances from a cohesive and dedicated cast and sustaining a rare emotional intensity throughout the evening. David Bell's set, dominated by a whitewashed besserblock monolith and a towering rack of blood-red cassocks, upholds a compelling anti-naturalism not perhaps fully realised in the acting style, which must cater for a script dedicated to the realistic texture of youthful banter.

The first few scenes are masterly, the exposition of the boys' situation — their castration, rigorous training and isolation — dovetailing with a series of insights into the love and humour that binds them. As an image of the spiritual crippling of children inflicted by the very institutions set up to care for them, the idea of orphans cheated into accepting castration as a sacrifice for vocal purity is potent enough but as a metaphor, developed and extended through action, it becomes marred with inconsistency and overexplicitness. Why, for example, is the invisible and therefore doubly menacing principal of the orphanage a Miss Lawson? Her sex is undeniably made an issue by mention of her predilection for Andrew, the stallion in this arena of geldings. Furthermore, it takes a considerable imaginative leap to the theory propounded by one of the play's all too voluble rasseuriers that "they do it to girls too"; the emotional potency of the castration image is just too restricted. Other inconsistencies are more mundane yet equally questionable, such as the suggestion by Michael that the boys will probably treat their children as they themselves have been treated — an immaculate conception?

As the structure of the play founders in the increasingly fragmentary final few scenes, the back of the metaphor is broken. Suddenly the action widens to include the whole of the orphanage; the dormitory, hitherto an apparently sufficient model, now becomes a cell in a wider social structure and the question emerges as to whether each cell has its own version of the father figure, mentor and bully that Andrew has come to represent. News of boys jumping from upper story windows and the threat of fire seem gratuitously introduced to hasten the apocalyptic climax in which Andrew himself will be castrated in a ritual of misdirected rebellion.

Perhaps to hope for a watertight correlative can be seen as placing a deterministic straightjacket on a play that seeks to explore the issue of freedom and authoritarianism in an essentially allusive and affective manner. Certainly, as a cluster of emotionally charged images and insights Bray's finely tuned dialogue and Nason's subtly orchestrated staging cannot be bettered. One's concern is that the failure of a sustained, productive metaphor to shape the action and events prevents the play from transcending the emotional immediacy of the experience and flowering into the political synthesis required by so profoundly important a theme.
Fine performances

CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

by Patsy McCarthy


Cast: Maggie, Carmen Duncan; Brick, Andrew McFarlane; Sonny, Brett Earle; Mae, Elaine Cusick; Big Mama, Gwen Wheeler; Dixie, Kirsty McKenna; Big Daddy, Noel Ferrier; Gooper, David Clendinning; Reverend Tooker, Leo Dockner; Doctor Baugh, Reginald Cameron; Sookey, Lorna Holloway; Buster, Rohan McKenna.

It is appropriate and exciting that Rodney Fisher, born in Brisbane and among Australia's best directors, should give the Queensland Theatre Company one of its finest evenings at the theatre. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is a production which demonstrates an understanding of the soul and thoughts of one of the world's great playwrights.

The themes of Tennessee Williams' plays are so universal that this play has dated very little in the twenty-five years since it was written. Through the eyes of his people we face the eternal dilemmas of hate and love in human relationships, the isolation and struggle for communication, the efforts to overcome sexual repression and the search for truth amidst life's many illusions. Tennessee Williams, himself a man of deep emotional sensitivity, always speaks powerfully to the feelings of his audience.

These characters are real people and, although the aura of the American South is important, we know they exist everywhere. The three major characters are Big Daddy, his son Brick and Brick's wife Maggie and each demands intense emotional involvement from the actor. All of these characters are complex and full of failings but are depicted by Williams with a human dignity and a capacity for love which makes them worth knowing and caring about. At the centre of this trio is Maggie the Cat who, like Big Daddy, is a fighter and a life-force in the play. In a house which 'smells of mendacity' she strives to be honest and is aware of the juxtaposition of tenderness and greed in herself. Carmen Duncan, although looking magnificent, was not quite able to bring out the passion and depth of feeling in this character and I could not feel her emotions and fight her struggles with her as an audience member should. Her performance, rather too urgent and pushing, did not quite give Maggie time to develop thoughtfulness and warmth under the surface frustration.

The loss of these emotions in Act One were highlighted when Noel Ferrier's Big Daddy and Andrew McFarlane's Brick confronted one another in Act Two. I began to feel the frustrations of the struggle for love and communication, the power of hate and the overwhelming force of honesty. The viewer felt the fear with each man as Brick realized the truth about his ideal relationship with Skipper and Big Daddy accepted his coming painful death. Noel Ferrier experienced Big Daddy's pain and the audience felt it also. The heroic qualities of Brick the anti-hero began to emerge. What fine performances.

The supporting performances were also strong — especially that of Elaine Cusick and David Clendinning. The mendacity and shallowness of Gooper and Mae were sickeningly portrayed by these two actors. Elaine Cusick is a remarkable actress: is it possible that this body and voice which are so unmistakably Mae could also be those which interpreted the sorrow and sturdiness of Mrs Kelly in The Last Outlaw? Gwen Wheeler's portrayal of Big Mama was convincing but lacked some of the sympathy which the character could achieve.

The QTC has recognized that Rodney Fisher has triumphed in the harsh struggle of Australian theatre. It would be heartening, however, if the company could also direct some of its Government subsidy towards encouraging new young actors and directors to ensure the continuation of such first rate talent in the future.

Marvellous touring cast

CELLULOID HEROS

by Larry Hall


Cast: Ali Shannon, Robert Alexander; Mike Fontaine, Michael Carman; Brett Rodgers, Wayne Jarratt; Gary Brady, Robin Bowering; Maggie Mureane, Jennifer Claire; Alison Mackay, Linda Cropper; Nestor Snell, Steve J Spears; Dick Birakool, Kevin Smith.

This is a terrible play. The storyline bogs down in the first act and evaporates in the second. At the end, the soliloquised epilogue startled, pronouncing swift death with decay and spoil-sharing by the vultures thereafter. There is nothing here about Australia, least of all about its film industry. Even the discerning among its audiences might be misled into thinking the demise of Australian theatre was being depicted — the projection (sic) of all afflictions onto the sibling art form. Yet this is not truly the case either.

Australian culture is healthy, and lying in that dormant phase after the rains before the fruits and flowers show. It is only impatient offshoots like this ('We want the world and we want it now' is their bloto motto) that perish in the dark, and deservedly so. The main stem is robust, and of that there is good evidence in this production. For all the play's weaknesses, I thoroughly enjoyed the evening. So too did the comparatively few others in the house...clapping, laughing, at times shrieking in unison. The saving grace was in the audience feeling it also. The heroic performances of Gooper and Mae were sickeningly portrayed by these two actors. Elaine Cusick is a remarkable actress: is it possible that this body and voice which are so unmistakably Mae could also be those which interpreted the sorrow and sturdiness of Mrs Kelly in The Last Outlaw? Gwen Wheeler's portrayal of Big Mama was convincing but lacked some of the sympathy which the character could achieve.

Michael Carman and Steven Spears, as the Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee rivals, linked by a fierce fraternal friendship beneath the surface whilst vying viciously for the favours of Ma and Pa (or those of big sister when no-one else was home)... This was a fine duo. Robert Alexander sustained fever-pitch admirably as the Dad barely able to control his own histrionics, let alone the shenanigans of his wild and wooly offspring. Linda Cropper was darling, dark and smouldering as Sis. And Jennifer Claire, warm and worldly, mature and maternal throughout — the still eye at the centre of this hopeless raging storm — gave a truly wonderful performance. Bravo. Let's hope this crew returns to Adelaide with a good play soon.

Birakool gave us some splendid moments but also remained for the most part on the periphery. At the core of things, marooned on this island as they were by the (usually better) playwright, five characters saved us by forging themselves into a kind of family. Tempers boiled, perhaps because Mum had left home for some time and only recently returned, and this hidden scenario provided by far the best entertainment.
"Mad Maggie" died in May, 1963. She was a fighter; a believer; a seeker after a personal and national truth through change; a realistic; the most influential Australian modernist painter of her generation. Margaret Preston... whose lifetime's struggle with form, medium and preoccupation revealed only how great she might have been. And Australia takes the credit and the blame.

The All Out Ensemble (and associated artists) takes the "bee-in-a-bottle" anger of this irrepressible woman and uses it as the emotional core of the event. The effect is sometimes galvanising, more often therapeutic. The artist's story is told in an environment dominated by a time-scape (1927-1952) of rude 3-D re-renderings of her works: Implement Blue; (a headless) Self Portrait; Golgotha; Expulsion from Eden. These works focus four of the five "stations" to which the performers, Peggy Wallach and Gerry Bonk, lead their audience. This gallery is quotidian reality inverted. The larger-than-life "Artist" is determinedly and defiantly "on fire" at the centre of the world. The public is pinned to the periphery.

The strength of the event and its several statements lies in the juxtaposition of sculptured images. By contrast, the words rail and swirl and lose, rather than gain, meaning from the incantatory vocal patterns and tonings employed by Wallach and the rapid-fire, almost gutteral, delivery of Bonk. This mixture of fluid and fixed, sound and sense, rarely gels with or achieves the quality of stilled life which marked Preston's own work; unless it is on those occasions when Preston's aphorisms are quoted, or in the return to the refrain, "I am the larrikin daughter of your error."

There is, in fact, a buildup of tension between performer and audience in the confrontation of desire to communicate, and the lack of understanding registered on the watchers' faces. This confrontation is most effectively resolved by the various sequence-changing assaults and violations of surface and space. The danger in this process is that the particular practice defeats the general intention. We tend to enjoy the destruction of Preston's work for...
works wonderfully as entertainment

TAKING SHAPE

by Amanda Lohrey/State Rep.


Director, Ken Kelso.

I've Got A Name by John Lonie; director, Richard Davey.

The Last Resort written and directed by Ken Kelso.

The Company: Mark Bromilow, Richard Lawrence, Mary McMenamin, Fiona Stewart, Christine Woodland, Les Wimpear.

(Professional)

Children and adolescents are among the most demanding of audiences and part of the fascination of watching any Theatre-in-Education company lies in exploring with them the new ways in which ideas can be given a vital theatrical form. The Salamanca Theatre Company recently previewed its season for the first half of '81 and gave further indication of the Company's success in this area while revealing some of the pitfalls awaiting ventures which aim to be didactic as well as entertaining.

The programme began with Taking Shape, devised by Mark Bromilow, a member of the Company. This is a delightful series of inventive and intriguing mimes designed for lower primary grades.

The second item was the John Lonie piece, I've Got A Name which has already met with considerable success in schools. It tells the story of Friedrich Sivka, a young Jewish boy who emigrates to Australia in the thirties. The play opens with Friedrich, in middle age, befriending a young Vietnamese refugee, Hahn. Friedrich reveals his story in flashback sequences, linked by conversations with Hahn in which she gives an account of her own experiences.

Despite its period context I've Got A Name has a very contemporary feel to it and an impressive emotional authenticity. This is partly the result of the great naturalness with which it is played. It's also related, one imagines, to the method used in devising the piece. John Lonie gathered a collection of documents from the period; the actors read and improvised on the documents; John scripted additional scenes and tightened the improvised material. When the character of Hahn proved unsatisfactory Fiona Stewart talked locally with a Vietnamese refugee woman and incorporated much of what she said into Hahn's narrative.

As a piece of entertainment I've Got A Name works wonderfully. The production by Richard Davey makes imaginative use of minimal props - black umbrellas, long scarves, colourful blankets - which not only work well in their own right but provide an ideal model for students of how they can transform everyday objects into effective theatrical devices. The Company performs with great deftness and vitality and there's plenty of music, laughs and tears. In that sense I've Got A Name is a foolproof piece of theatre for schools - full of liveliness and a likeable underdog with whom its audience can identify.

Despite that, I've got some reservations about this sort of material. It works well for lower secondary but would not be sufficient to extend an upper secondary group. In a sense, it's a piece of easy didacticism. The Nazis are unambiguous villains we can all comfortably hate and Hahn is basically an appendage to the story of the Jewish boy Friedrich. Hahn's dilemma as a Vietnamese is hardly touched on; it remains a topical peg on which to hang an earlier story.

The major item on the STC's programme was to be Ken Kelso's The Last Resort, an allegory set in a mediaeval city. The Company previewed six scenes of the play - which runs for an hour and a half - but has decided not to perform it for twelve months or until further work can be done. Ken Kelso's aim is to present a range of moral responses to a social upheaval in an impressionistic and open-ended way. The perennial problem of giving abstract themes and language sufficient dramatic structure to engage an audience has yet to be resolved.

Salamanca has a number of interesting projects to come. Dave Allen will be writer-in-residence circa August 1981 and is interested in working on a theme from Tasmanian history. Barry Oakley will be writing for the Company in 1982. Richard Meredith is working on an adaptation of Annie's Coming Out. John Gaden has been invited to direct the Dave Allen piece and also to run an actor's workshop later in the year.
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A rare treat

THE TWO HEADED CALF

by Suzanne Spunner/State Rep.


Adapted, translated from Polish and directed by Roger Pulvers; designer. Peter King and Michael Anderson. Cast: Lady Leokadia Clay, Maggie Millar, Karina Clay, Geoffrey Clendon; Professor Edward Mikulin, Chris Ferguson; Ludwig Parvis, Howard Stanley; King Aparura and Murphy, William Gluth; Sir Robert Clay and Jack Rivers. Peter Hobking; Mirabella, Sue Jones.

In adapting and translating Witkacy's The Metaphysics of The Two-Headed Calf Roger Pulvers shortened the title in the interests of clarity and a more homely style. After its extraordinary reception, he may be tempted in future to lengthen it to The Persecution and Assassination of The Two-Headed Calf by the inmates of the Melbourne critical enclave under the direction of the Marquis de Philistine.

For it has been a long time since a play has provoked such consummate and systematic misinterpretation; one would almost have thought that none of them had ever seen an Absurdist play. It would appear that overnight the sole purpose of theatre became the equitable distribution of meaning in take-home packs like Red Cross parcels for the spiritually deprived. Once they had all leapt in with leaden feet onto the 1-didn't-understand-it-therefore-it-must-be... bandwagon there was nowhere left to go, notwithstanding Jack Hibberd's witty and eloquent defence in Hibberd's witty and eloquent defence in The Age.

In 1914, the precocious and prolific Polish writer and artist Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, better known as Witkacy, landed in Fremantle in a party led by his father's friend, the prominent anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, to attend an anthropological conference and investigate the local life. They travelled widely in Western Australia before moving on to the eastern states. When war was imminent Witkacy returned to Europe and Malinowski resumed his field work in New Guinea.

In 1966 while a graduate student in Poland Roger Pulvers saw productions of Witkacy's plays. This experience marked the beginning of Pulvers' obsession with Witkacy and his decision to write for

theatre; it eventually led him, like Witkacy, to Australia.

The play opens in the Governor's residence in Port Moresby and swiftly moves by boat to the Hotel Australia in Sydney and thence by train to a desert outside Kalgoorlie in the course of which the Governor and his wife appear to be struck down by the dreaded Fly River Fever leaving their young son to fend for himself with the natives. At one level the play is a black comedy in which tragic deaths provide the source of some of the wittiest lines and the most bizarrely comic moments, but it is also a Freudian Fantasia on oedipal frustration, sexual guilt and the crippling effect of parents on their children. In this context Witkacy's ability to transform these serious concerns into startling comic images makes Wedekind look, by comparison, very earnest and straight-laced. In addition to killing off the domineering father, the castrating mother and her lover, Witkacy not only rewrites Hamlet but manages to aim well-honed shafts at colonialist politics, imperialist anthropology and the Australian psyche, be it in the form of the legendary bushman or the mineral boomer; which isn't too bad for a play devoid of "content".

Peter King's design, based on an off true interior where the angles of the doors and walls were a visual pun on the conventions of naturalistic theatre, set the tone of what was to be a stylish mockery of the theatre of conflict and issues. Pulvers' direction was precise and exciting and relied as much for its witty effect on visual parody as it did on Witkacy's considerable verbal felicity.

Ironically for a production which inaugurated the new APG policy of bringing in outside directors, the acting style in its acute observation of physical quickness, was reminiscent of early APG work. It was a delight to see uproarious humour arising out of intelligent and subtle playing. Maggie Millar's Lady Leokadia Clay was all elegant petulance and velvet gloved manipulation delivered in the broadest nasal Australian vowels, and Howard Stanley's commanding ocker prototype, Ludwig Parvis, twitching and threatening to flatten anyone who mentioned the word "artist" were a pleasure to behold. It was Peter Hobking in the double role of the stiff-upper-lip Governor and later as Jack Rivers the Kalgoorlie carpet-bagger. Hobking's Rivers conjured up visions of Chad Morgan after extensive bridge work.

There were some lovely moments of comic business — two characters are discussing death and other metaphysical teasers while one of them is playing Itsy-Bitsy spider along the other's arm, or when Mirabella (Sue Jones) having completed her sexy dance and sensuously discarded the six foot long rubber python, advances sinuously upon Rivers and kisses the cigarette out of the corner of his mouth.

The opportunity to see The Two-Headed Calf was not only a rare treat in itself, but a chance to realign on a broader base our knowledge of the Absurdist tradition and for some to reveal the limitations of their sense of the theatrical.

Engaging, humorous and harrowing

BLEEDIN' BUTTERFLIES

by Cathy Peake


Director, Ron Horin; Designer, Tracy Watt; Lighting, Stage Manager, Robert Gerbert. Cast: May Sewell, Monica Maughan; Leo Sewell, David Kendall; Jack Broadbent, David Swan; Christine Smith, Cathrine Lynch; Jimmy Lamb, Mark Minchinston; Nina Lamb, Maree D'Arcy. (Professional)

Doreen Clarke's Bleedin' Butterflies is a rollicking, working class drama set in a shanty town for the unemployed and the
homeless outside Perth during the '30s. Conceived in a strictly naturalistic vein, the script teems with jokes, anecdotes, songs, popular wisdom and superstition.

One of Clarke's chief strengths is her ability to write dialogue for women. In fact the male characters in Bleedin' Butterflies are rather weakly drawn and the production at the Playbox leaves little doubt that her chief interest lies with the lives of her three women — frontier women in the sense of a survival frontier — all of them inextricably bound to men who have deserted them.

Her women are sharply differentiated. In am ambience of fish, mutton, turnips, "susso" and the occasional theft, May Sewell — played with wit, unflagging energy and a brilliant sense of timing by Monica Maughan, emerges as the real strength of the camp, her ribald, earthy vernacular being tempered by large doses of social conscience and the proverbial "heart of gold".

Only at the end of the play, when she is deserted by her raffish husband Leo (David Kendall) does she betray any real vulnerability to the appalling poverty and the hopelessness of her position.

By contrast Nina Lamb (Maree D'Arcy) seems to have been set up for full scale tragedy from the start. Mother of Jimmy, a retarded adolescent, her life is circumscribed by the bible, a meagre pride, moral rectitude and the apparently incredible hope that her husband Bert will return "from the road". Indeed it is the absent Bert who supplies most of the clues to her character and her rapid disintegration when she receives a letter from Bert's de facto wife at Mt Barker is no surprise.

The last of the trio is Christine (Catherine Lynch), young, pretty, pregnant, married and installed in the camp where she lives as Jack Broadbent's wife. Formerly the victim of a run-away chauffeur, she is forced to live in the shadow of Jack's mother, which, in effect, means that her marriage is never consummated, she is deserted by Jack, raped by Leo Sewell, loses the baby and, finally, leaves for Adelaide.

The entire action of the play, except the rape, takes place outside Jack Broadbent's shack, and it is the figure of Jack (played rather awkwardly by David Swann) who towers behind the wave of catastrophic events that brings Bleedin' Butterflies to its conclusion.

More like a two dimensional cardboard cut-out than a man, hidebound by convention and riddled with complexes, Clarke uses the sanctimonious "shelter" that is provided by the Broadbent shack to create an image for the society that has spawned both the Depression and the shanty town which it appears to use as a further instrument of repression.

If there is rather too much symmetry about the construction of her play and its message, and if it unwinds with a speed that detracts from the pain of individual fate, it is more than well served at the Playbox by its cast and the spare, intelligent direction of Ros Horin.

At some levels the material of Bleedin' Butterflies is very much the stuff of TV dramas, and there were times when the schematics of its plot almost led one to expect the customary commercial break. But it is more than that. With a couple of exceptions, the strong performances, the highly detailed and textured set and the accuracy of its dialogue have made it an engaging, humorous and often harrowing exercise in survival.
An odd couple

THE WOMAN WHO DIED FOR HER HUSBAND
THE BEAR

by Suzanne Spunner

The Woman Who Died For Her Husband and The Bear: The Mill Theatre Company, Blakiston Theatre, Geelong Performing Arts Centre, Victoria; Opened April 1, 1981.
Producer: Diana Stewart; Stage Manager: Neil Greenaway; Lighting: James Newman.
The Woman Who Died For Her Husband by Euripides: Director, James McCaughey; Designer, Neil Greenaway.
The Bear by Anton Chekhov: Director and Designer, Barbara Ciszewska.

Cast: Apollo, Diana Stewart; Death, William Henderson; Servant, Margaret Ricketts; Admetos, King of Thessaly, Ernie Gray; Alkestis, Rosalind Hill; Heracles, Ian Campbell; Pheres, William Henderson; Servant, Diana Stewart.
The Bear by Anton Chekhov: Director and Designer, Barbara Ciszewska.
Cast: Popova, Rosalind Hill; Looka, Ian Campbell; Smirnov, Ernie Gray.

The Mill Theatre Company’s decision to pair Chekhov’s comic-farce The Bear with Euripides’ tragic-comedy The Woman Who Died For Her Husband (better known as Alkestis) is a further instance of director James McCaughey’s eclectic style and theatrical panache. On first sight the combination seems perverse; classical Greek drama and 19th century naturalism, indeed an odd couple make, but it quickly proved to be not only an apt combination but an inspired piece of matchmaking. For both plays turn on love and death and farcically expose the necrophiliac tendencies of their characters. The two couples — Alkestis and Admetos, and Popova and Smirnov — are incapable of saying what they mean (and clearly feel) about love because of their fixation with death; Alkestis dies for her husband to prove her love, while Popova wishes she could do the same.

In each play there is a third pivotal character whose task it is to reveal to the couples that what they think is a death wish; is in fact a desire for love.

Thus the role of Heracles in The Woman Who Died For Her Husband parallels Looka’s role in The Bear. This production made the correspondence explicit by using the same trio of actors — Rosalind Hill played Alkestis and Popova to Ernie Gray’s Admetos and Smirnov; while Ian Campbell played Heracles and Looka.

Although the productions had different directors and designers, they were informed by a unified visual and spatial aesthetic and a similar imaginative physical acting style which expressed the company’s highly developed ensemble sensibility.

Director James McCaughey’s approach was to expose the comic perversity of the central action; (dying for love) rather than worrying about the role of the gods — Apollo became merely an accessory to the action. The texture of the play came through the placement of bodies in space and the revelation of text as sound music.

For The Bear Barbara Ciszewska added four props; a fireman’s pole, an extention ladder, a wooden chair and a feather quilt. The characters entered down the pole and left by the ladder which was a brilliant resolution of the problem of the absurd number of exits and entrances in the play and simultaneously a leap away from naturalism into a wonderfully funny, almost slapstick style of performance. The ways in which these very simple objects were exploited continually extended the comic business and enriched the text. The final scene will serve as an example of this ingenious fusion of Brecht and Kabuki — as they are saying “I hate you... keep away...”, Popova and Smirnov are walking toward each other backwards pistols raised, they collide back to back at the pole just as Looka slides down it upside down, and as he stops mid-slide and registers what’s happening they slide to the floor and lay supine splayed out from the foot of the pole, their legs entwined. Popova raises her head to tell Looka not to worry about the oats and she delivers this ridiculous line as if it were a post-coital statement — which in terms of the logic of the play, it was.

The combination of Ciszewska’s direction and stunning performances by Rosalind Hill, Ernie Gray and Ian Campbell made The Bear rank as the funniest and most exciting piece of theatre in a long time.

THEATRE AUSTRALIA MAY 1981 57
Skill and credible plotting

VINEGAR AND BROWN PAPER

by Collin O'Brien


Director: Edgar Metcalfe; Designer: Gene Banducci.

Cast: Rebecca, Liz Horne; Jill, Rosemary Barr; Matthew, John Tarrant; Jack, Vic Hawkins; Carol, Gillian Lomberg; John, Gerald Hitchcock.

(Professional)

Following the success of Garden Party last year Edgar Metcalfe has written and produced Vinegar And Brown Paper, a play in the same vein of realistic comedy. This time it is on a domestic rather than social interaction level, as though the garden party has come indoors to the kitchen/dining area.

The play focusses on the breakdown of marriage in contemporary suburbia. The central action is an erring husband's monthly visit for dinner with his wife and two teenage children. It is set in one of the more opulent hills suburbs of Perth, but could equally translate to a similar setting anywhere in Australia.

A sensitive performance by Vic Hawkins as the husband Jack, a nice mixture of nervous bonhomie, the ravages of a stomach ulcer and out and out guilt. Rosemary Barr's Jill tries to put a pleasant, civilized face on things, but the pain leading to acidity, even bitchiness, of real hurt keep breaking through. The children, played by Liz Horne and John Tarrant, convey that peculiar teenage air of being more knowing and more scarred than their collective cool can hide. It sounds a depressing picture, and it is, but sauced with wry humour and shrewd observation.

Mr Metcalfe adds dimension to his play by breaking with straight realistic convention. In a series of asides Jack talks with his current inamorata Carol (Gillian Lomberg), and Jill with a young wooer John (Gerald Hitchcock). It looks at first as if Jill is in the process of taking a lover of her own, until the realization in Act Two that John is Jack as a young man. It is a dramatically effective device, skilfully employed.

The setting by Gene Banducci showed a keen eye for the lifestyle of this social level of family; there was also sound direction by the playwright himself. Bearing in mind many current playwrights' inability to get a coherent act together there is no question that Edgar Metcalfe's ability to find a pertinent theme and his skill in combining credible plotting with interesting characterisation earn him a niche in Australian playwriting. Certainly his plays deserve a wider audience than Perth provides.
No plausibility

NO NAMES NO PACKDRILL

by Margot Luke


Director: Stephen Barry; Designer: Steve Nolan; Lighting: Duncan Ord; Stage Manager: George Tsousis.

Cast: Rebel: Steven Tandy; Kathy: Sher Guhl; Tiger: Ross Coli; Mrs Palmer: Margaret Ford; Joyce: Polly Low; Bernie: Maurie Ogden; Browning: Ivan King; Webb: Rod Hall; Lambert: Jay Walsh; Wood: Dennis Schulz.

(Professional)

One kept wondering why Bob Herbert wrote the play. It's neither quite comedy, nor quite period-piece. It doesn't really say anything original about deserters from wars, nor about human relationships when people are suddenly thrown together in situations of crisis or unplanned intimacy.

The set (by Steve Nolan) gave opportunities for nostalgic detail — the awful furnishings were just right, but why did even the heroine have to have the ugliest possible version of the forties hairdo? And the slang seemed rather self-consciously dragged in for verisimilitude.

It's 1942 — Sydney — and an American deserter holes up with a young woman who enjoys a few parties with the Yanks while her husband is away fighting. (He's later reported killed.) She conspires with a wheeler-dealer to help the young American slip out of the country; naturally she falls in love with him, and naturally there are a number of cliff-hanging moments (more particularly toward the end of the play), with a nosy landlady, local police as well as American military police providing the interruptions.

The first act is too wordy and repetitive, and one could forgive Margaret Ford for trying too hard to enliven it with a send-up of the landlady (who later becomes more convincingly and three-dimensionally nasty). In fact, the impression remains throughout, that the play requires great imagination in direction to make it come to life at all. In Stephen Barry's production there is far too much stiffness — characters standing centrestage talking to each other, and not knowing what to do with their bodies. There is a fair bit of miscasting too.

Stephen Tandy, whilst likeable as the young "coward" (read "survivor"), has difficulties with the American accent — which he tries to overcome by flattening his voice to an uncomfortable degree. Sher Guhl, appearing in her first big role in the Playhouse is not allowed to use her natural charm, but is forcefully toned down into a drab little suburbanite — totally wrong. A 1942 girl with a flat in Kings Cross, even if she does only work for the post office, would not dream of being dowdy, and wouldn't be seen dead in that hairstyle.

The minor characters come out rather better — Ross Coli makes the most of the meaty part of 'Tiger' Kelly, the shady black marketeer and fixer, and Ivan King is impressive as the detective, moving from nice-guy paternal authority figure to vindictive petty tyrant.

Possibly the main trouble is that one doesn't really believe in any of the characters — their motivations or their actions. Neither the lies they tell each other, nor the subterfuges they engage in have any degree of plausibility, and the dialogue is not sufficiently interesting to distract the mind from this basic weakness.
Legacy but not tradition

Contemporary Australian Drama: Perspectives since 1955. Edited by Peter Holloway, Currency Press, rrp $24.95.

Someone once said that a critic is a person created to praise greater people than himself, but he is never able to find any. An illiterate, witless, incoherent ragbag collection of writers, directors and actors shamble through the theatres for review and the critic is expected to be literate, witty and coherent writing about them. It is an impossible task — one which only an unquenchable optimist, with a profound love of theatre, could continue to attempt.

And yet Australian critics continue to attempt it. Currency Press’s 10th anniversary book, Contemporary Australian Drama, records their efforts, and if it reveals that in many important ways they have failed, it is still salutary to note the magnitude of their task — before, in turn, criticizing them.

When, after years of relative silence, Australian plays suddenly came tumbling onto our stages, in the ‘50s and again in the ‘70s, there was no critical climate of opinion in which to describe and evaluate them. Like everybody else the critics were taken by surprise. And it is not easy to take some new play that some crazy, obsessed writer or theatre has flung at you, and then analyse it for readers so that they will best know how to go about appreciating and enjoying it. It is perhaps not surprising that sometimes critics will go overboard, praising a mediocrity too highly or failing to recognize a masterpiece.

The critic is further hampered by the expectation that if he is going to write usefully about something he should be able to do it himself. Like the eunuch in the harem, he ought to know how it’s done, he ought to have seen it done, but it is unreasonable to expect him to be always doing it himself. It is a sign of some Australian critics’ innocence and gullibility and trust that they keep trying.

George Jean Nathan said that a critic’s first responsibility was to Dramatic Art, even if it meant closing every theatre in the country. This is the opposite of the critic’s real function — which is to keep theatres open by revealing to potential audiences what they can get out of theatre, by pointing out value wherever and whenever it may be found. There is a story of a wine connoisseur who sipped a glass of sauterne, praised fulsomely its qualities as a great wine of its kind, and then pushed the glass away. Asked why he wasn’t going to finish it, he said, “I hate sauterne.” But the recognition of its value came first.

Contemporary Australian Drama does, however reveal that Australian critics over the last 25 years have not measured up to the task of explaining and evaluating the work of Australian dramatists. (The book does not concern itself with general theatre criticism.) An anthology of criticism such as this can have one of two functions: it can be a collection of entertaining articles on plays one couldn’t care less about (giving the sort of pleasure one gets from Tynan’s or Agate’s anthologies) or it can stand as a record, from the front line, of significant events of its period. This book is neither. There are too many gaps, too many unexplained phenomena, too many examples of complex writers “summed up” in one or two idiotyncratic articles. Some attempt has been made to commission articles to fill in gaps, but it is half-hearted and misleading (giving an undue weight, for example, to the short-lived Emerald Hill Theatre in Melbourne.)

The hard-pressed editor, however, cannot be expected to do everything himself. (Although it is a scandal that Ian Robinson’s mindless diatribe against Buzo should be included without Buzo’s own piece, and at the expense, for example, of Dorothy Hewett’s beautiful review of Makassar Reef.) The main fault must lie with the critics themselves. This book’s introduction admits that Australian critics have left a critical legacy but hardly a critical tradition: “Such a collection as this will have value if it can indicate the need for and development of such a tradition.” It is a modest aim for a major critical anthology — to illustrate the need for more — and it is accomplished. Buzo has written a few more plays since 1975, Williamson since 1976.

Specifically the book, by anthologizing articles that seemed important at the time, perpetuates various critical fallacies. The matter of whether the slum-realist plays of the ‘70s do or do not contain enough heightened. Chekhovian human conflict is now generally regarded as a non-issue. Certainly the same argument applied to some writers of the ‘70s has never been a real issue. Possibly this book will be used by future students of Australian theatre and the articles in it are thus given some weight of influence. The book attempts to rescue from oblivion the memory of Emerald Hill, but it totally ignores many other influential companies (such as Sydney’s Jane Street Theatre). In the sections on individual playwrights some very odd, and sometimes rather specialized opinions are expressed. In the absence of a balanced range of criticism, some editorial comment is at least needed to guide potential students away from the bizarre and idiotyncratic.

It is still a very useful and interesting book, though, and I’m sorry to leave it till the end to say so, but that is the way of reviewers. It makes available some material otherwise difficult to obtain and it gives an interesting new perspective on the growth of a theatrical climate of opinion. The truth is complex, and beyond the power of any individual to discover, so books such as this are a natural (and democratic) tool in the great search for it.
THEATRE

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL PLAYWRIGHTS CONFERENCE. To May 10.

TEMPO THEATRE (47 4222)


PLAYHOUSE (49 6488)

THEATRE 3 (47 4222)

CANBERRA THEATRE (49 7600)
Australian National Playwrights Conference: To May 10.

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THEATRE AUSTRALIA MAY 1981

OPERA

CANBERRA THEATRE (49 7600)
Canberra Opera presents Dialogues Of The Carmelites by Poulenc. May 1-2.

NORTH AND NORTH WEST AREAS FROM MAY 27.

BONDI PAVILION THEATRE (30 7211)
The Lion In Winter by James Goldman; directed by Vincent Ball. Commences May 13.

CAPITOL THEATRE (212 3455)
Elvis The Stage Spectacular; with Vince Eager, Bo Wills and JJ Mclean. Recomences May 11.

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Elvis The Stage Spectacular; with Vince Eager, Bo Wills and JJ Mclean. Recomences May 11.

NEW THEATRE (519 3403)
Yobbo Nowt by Kevin McGrath; directed by Marie Armstrong. Until May 9.

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NSW THEATRE

ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW SOUTH WALES (357 6611)
Adult Tours: Human Veins Dance Theatre; North and North West areas from May 27.

BONDI PAVILION THEATRE (30 7211)
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**SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY**
(D20588)
Drama Theatre, SOH:

**THEATRE ROYAL** (2316111)
Amphi-Theatron in Epitrepontes. May 1 to 9. De Horde in Delusion. May 12 to 16.


**DANCE**

**THE AUSTRALIAN BALLET**
(20588)
Opera Theatre, SOH:

For entries contact Carole Long on 3571200/9093010.

**QLD THEATRE**

**ARTS THEATRE** (362344)
*Treats* by Christopher Hampton; director, Bruce Parr; with Michael McCaffrey and Jennifer Flowers. May 7-13.

CAMERATA THEATRE (2711734)
The Cement Box: *Antigone* director, Ron Twaddle. To May 9.

HER MAJESTY'S (2212777)
*Elvis*. To May 9.

Big Bad Mouse with Eric Sykes and Jimmy Edwards. May 19-30.

LA BOITE THEATRE (361622)
*Occupations* by Trevor Griffiths; director, Jeremy Ridgman; designer, Andrew Weir. To May 16.

POPULAR THEATRE TROUPE (361745)
Ring theatre for current programme.

**MUMMERS THEATRE TROUPE** (2653871)
The Cement Box: *A Ionesco Festival* director, Robyn Roylance. May 18-30.

QUEENSLAND THEATRE COMPANY (2213861)

**SA THEATRE**

**ACTING COMPANY** (2675111)
*Schools: I Wanted to Draw The Mind The Other Day.* May 11-16.

ELDER PARK (510121)
*SBSA Tent: Gillian Farrelly.* May 18-23.

**QUEENSLAND BALLET COMPANY**
(2293355)

For entries contact Jeremy Ridgman on 3772519/385495.

**SA THEATRE**

**ARTS THEATRE** (362344)
*Wanted to Draw The Mind The Other Day.* May 11-16.

ELDER PARK (510121)
*SBSA Tent: Gillian Farrelly.* May 18-23.

**THEATRE ROYAL** (346266)

For entries contact Lucy Wagner on (02) 291818.

**TAS THEATRE**

**POLYGON THEATRE COMPANY** (348018)
In rehearsal: *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas.

**SALAMANCA THEATRE COMPANY** (235259)

**THEATRE ROYAL** (346266)

For entries contact Lucy Wagner on (02) 291818.
"best" scripts would seem to lean very much in favour of the experienced.

To offer a balanced service to our now established theatre, a National Playwrights' Conference must continue to introduce new blood into the system and foster the development of mature talent that is currently in circulation. Change and movement is the life force of any art form, but consolidation and maturity is the structure on which it rests. One of the greatest assets the Canberra fortnight has to offer to young writers is exchange and discussion with experienced playwrights. Both levels may gain greater insights by sharing the workshop process.

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THESPIA'S PRIZE CROSSWORD No. 31

Across:
1. Forbids one to bury the laws that were never started (10)
8. Doesn’t apply to the little girl in Fiji (4)
10. He mounts a framework of alloy around the tea shop (10)
11. Dumps out point of land (4)
13. It’s oversubtle, but it could be ten you owe us (7)
15. Straight king is around, at home (6)
16. Chat about one corsair (6)
17. Observant tumbler Alice gets through (3, 7, 5)
18. Smoking jacket? (6)
20. Second rate haystacks used in walls (6)
21. Cancels teacher education in troubled Leeds (7)
22. Picture purchased with the odd coin (4)
25. Time to reorganise Horn and Log Coy (10)
26. Send peas rolling about in church (4)
27. What to do to milk from poor field is to be noted (10)

Down:
2. Points to a model home (4)
3. Test a first person statement of previous existence (4)
4. The German about … one very loud … can be distinguishable from … (6)
5. … dashing but two dimensional playboys? (9, 6)
6. Put the pressure on a higher echelon (4, 2)
7. Cuts hair, upsets (10)
9. Manifestation a very soft listener can perhaps point to (10)
12. Unforthcoming international information for Cupid about class (10)
13. Nola and Ted’s union ended in clawing (7)
14. Burn two characters in The Choir (7)
19. Strange! His rep. is again put on a boat (6)
20. Describe hovel suit is found in (6)
23. Character leaves vocal group to gain fibre (4)
24. Candy, especially popcorn, contains artificial colouring (4)

THESA's Prize

Crossword No. 31

Across:
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The last month's winner is Mrs Carole Stannard of Glenorie, NSW. The first correct entry drawn on May 25 will receive one year’s free subscription to TA.
**WA**

**THEATRE**

**HOE IN THE WALL** (381 2403)
* Bodies by James Saunders; director, Stephen Barry. To May 23.

**PLAYHOUSE** (325 3500)


**OCTOGON THEATRE** (380 2440)
* Mason Miller presents: The Importance Of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde. To May 23.

**ST GEORGE'S HALL** (325 3500)
* Perth Actors' Company: Ring Around The Moon by Anouilh; director, Ken Campbell-Dobie. To May 9.

**HOLE IN THE WALL** (381 2403)

**PLAYBOX THEATRE COMPANY**
* The Go Anywhere Show by the company.

**UNIVERSAL THEATRE** (419 3777)
* The One Extra Dance Theatre presents: Vanished Species by Michael Matou; with Graeme Watson and Kai Tai Chan. To May 3.

**MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY**

**WEST COMMUNITY THEATRE** (370 7034)

**AMATEUR THEATRE GROUPS**
* State Opera; conductors, Richard Divall, Andrew Greene and Graham Cox; director, John Milson.

**PRINCESS THEATRE** (662 2911)
* The Barber of Seville by Rossini; with the Australian Opera. May 1,4,16,21.

**LA TRAVIATA**
* Katrina Kabanova by Janacek. May 2,6,8, 25, 30.

**THE Beggars Opera** by John Lay. May 22,

For entries contact Connie Kramer on 86 9448.

**VIC**

**THEATRE**

**ALEXANDER THEATRE** (543 2828)
* Noddy Comes To Town. May 11-23. Same Time Next Year director, Don McKay.

**AUSTRALIAN PERFORMING GROUP** (347 7133)
* Steel City Sister by Joy Weidersatz; director, Denis Moore; designer, Peter King and Michael Anderson.

**ARENA THEATRE** (249 667)
* Drama Workshops.

**ARTS COUNCIL OF VICTORIA** (529 4355)
* Ringwood Cultural Centre: Old Herba-...nance; director, Roger Clissold; dramatised by Alfred Shaughnessy. From the book by Reginald Arkell. To May 9.

**BANANA LOUNGE** (419 2869)
* Humour And Smokey Blues. Throughout May.

**COMEDY CAFE THEATRE**
* The Importance Of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde. To May 23.

**LA MAMA** (347 6085)
* The Novice by Michael McGennon.

**FLYING TRAPEZE CAFE** (413 7272)
* Tch-Tch-Tch.

**HOLE IN THE WALL** (381 2403)
* Store At Room Temperature by Suzanna Trotter and Landscape by Harold Pinter. May 6-10.

**LA MAMA** (347 6085)
* Emily Dickinson Abroad by Meredith Rogers, based on letters and poems by Emily Dickinson. May 13-24.

**LAST LAUGH THEATRE**
* Noahs Nuclear Niche by Anthony Thoro-good; director, Ian Nash. May 27-June 7.

**MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY** (654 4000)
* Athenaeum Theatre: Pete McGinty And The Dreamtime by Keith Michell; director, John Sumner; designer, Anne Fraser. To May 11.

**MILL THEATRE COMPANY** (222 318)
* Don Quixote devised and written by the company. May 11-22. Community Access Workshops.

**MUSHROOM TROUPE/ MOUNTEBANK** (376 7364)
* Mill Nights. Run Of The Mill. Teenage Workshops.

**MUSHROOM TROUPE/ MOUNTEBANK** (376 7364)
* Flying Heroes devised by the company. Ace by Alison Richards. Performances Universal Theatre May 11-23.

**MURRAY RIVER PERFORMING GROUP** (217 615)

**PLAYBOX THEATRE COMPANY** (634 888)
* Downstairs: Australian premiere: I Sent A Letter To My Love by Bernice Rubens; director, Malcolm Robertson; designer,